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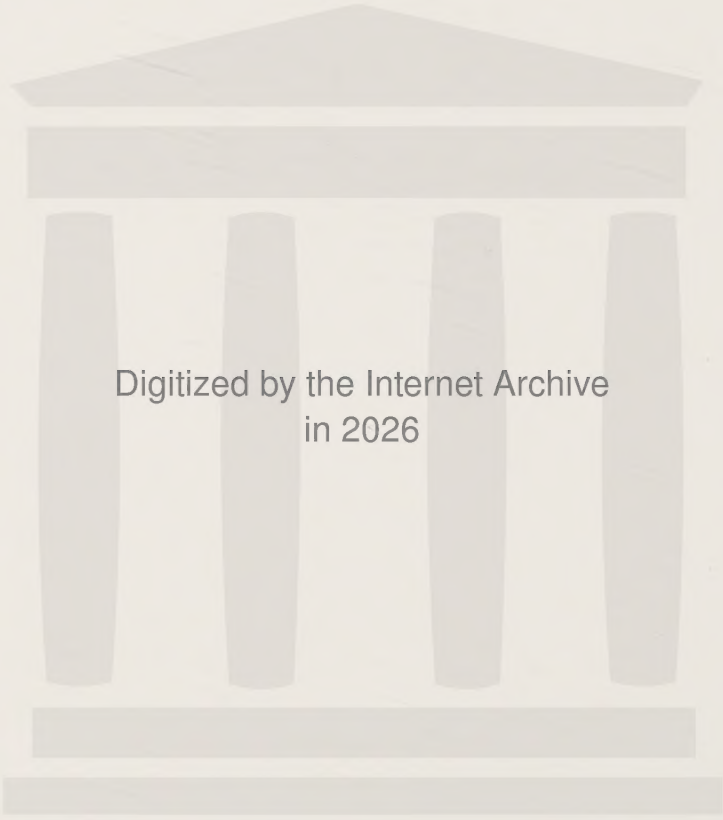
ALLIES AND ENEMIES
BOOK ONE
FALLEN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ALLIES AND ENEMIES FALLEN

AMY J. MURPHY

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By: Amy J. Murphy.

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PART 1

PART I

1

"Clear! In here, sir!"

Commander Sela Tyron followed the voice of her sergeant through the inner shadows of the building. Strength waning, she half-carried Atilio, her team's injured meditech, up the stairs into an oddly shaped room. Around her, the seven remaining members of her team called out as they cleared the structures beyond this one. So far, no hostiles.

Sweat stung her eyes and trickled between her shoulder blades under the restrictive harness of her field armor. The heat was palpable, collecting in the stagnant air. These things barely registered with her. For Sela, there was only the chaos of staying alive and keeping her people that way.

She tightened her grip around Atilio's waist. The young man had lost a lot of blood. Too much. His arm, slung over her shoulders, had become a limp weight. His head rolled forward.

Her heart clenched. *I cannot lose him.*

"Valen!" she bellowed for her sergeant.

She spotted a long waist-high table near the room's center covered with tiny clay oil lamps. It looked sturdy enough a place to get a better look at Atilio's injuries.

Wordlessly, Valen appeared at Atilio's other side. Clay pots shattered to the stone floor as they heaved the injured man as gently as possible onto the table. She snapped open the hidden clasps to his field armor and suppressed a gasp.

"Stay with me. Stay with me, Atilio." Her plea was a frantic hush as she peeled away his blood-soaked shirt. The bleeding seemed to be slowing. She wasn't sure if that was a good thing. "What was the first damned thing I told you, sub-officer?"

"Try… try not to get killed," Atilio wheezed.

His attempt at a chuckle turned into a wet bout of coughing. His hand, sticky with blood, weakly clasped hers. He was fading. His eyes slid shut once more. His skin was so cold, despite the nearly killing heat.

"Stay awake. That's an order," Sela snapped, digging her knuckles into his sternum. To her relief, the pain roused him and the young man's eyes opened.

Not him. Not him. Not like this. A stupid mistake, a lucky shot with bad timing.

"What is this place, boss?" Valen asked under his breath. Sela had forgotten he was there.

Planting her hands on the table, she finally looked around. Sconces lit the circular chamber in intervals but the flickering light did nothing to dispel the shadows of the high domed ceiling. Low benches lined the walls. The floor was dotted with threadbare cushions. The cloying smell of sabet incense permeated everything. On the wall closest to them, a crude pictograph of three female figures dominated the room. Natus. Metauri. Nyxa. The mother, the maiden and the crone. A ribbon of colored paint flowed over and around the trio. It was the type of room that commanded reverence.

"A temple to the Fates." She purposefully spoke at a normal tone. This was all rubbish. It was only a room, nothing more.

Valen blinked. "Never seen such. Is that why they're not coming in here, because it's their shrine?"

He panned a torch over the image of the three women. In the cast-off light he looked just as Sela felt, shredded and raw.

"I don't know. We're alive. That's what I know. Understood?"

"Understood, boss." He still sounded spooked.

"It's just a room, Valen."

She turned her attention back to Atilio, trying to dismiss the hairs standing on end on the back of her neck. Considering the building's use it would not have been her first choice for a shelter, but it was a fortified location, easily defendable, with only one point of access barred with a heavy iron-banded door. Good vantage of the town's lower streets from a walled courtyard. Despite all that, it felt *wrong* to be there. The reasons slipped her scrutiny at the moment. She had more pressing issues.

The other members of her team had dispersed throughout the structure and their shouts punctuated the heavy perfumed air. So far, it was all clear. There were no priests or worshipers here. If Deinde Company's presence in this place

angered the Tasemarin, eventually they might summon the courage to attack. For right now, this would do.

Small arms fire popped in the distance, echoing in the valley of the tiny ruined hamlet outside. Valen and Sela turned to each other with the unspoken question hanging between them: *If we're all here… then who was that?*

Everything had gone skew so quickly. The moment their boots hit the ground that morning, air support was withdrawn. "Sandstorms," came the terse response to her inquiry over vox. Strykers were vulnerable in denser atmo and Fleet was not willing to risk the resource. Right off, the four teams deployed to government center had begun to fall victim to guerilla attacks that separated them in the unfamiliar terrain.

A nagging thought weighed on Sela: Tasemarin were being aided somehow and had been prepared for the Regime's arrival. There was organization here, something remarkable in a settlement that had, according to intel, few armaments and a negligible populace with no military training.

Whatever the reason, before the first of Tasemar's dwarf suns had slipped into the horizon of the stagnant red sky, her team had been forced into street-to-street fighting with no hope of gaining control of their target, the government complex.

She felt Valen's silent stare. He was waiting for orders.

"Get the lay of it. Check on other wounded."

"On it, boss."

"Munitions check too," she called after him, although she could have guessed the response on that: *not good.*

In the distance and conveyed by her vox, she heard him relay the orders to Simirya, one of the two heavy-gunners.

On the table, Atilio coughed. It was a weak sound. His eyes were open again and a thin froth of blood seeped from the corner of his mouth. She grabbed the depleted medistat kit. She had watched him employ its contents three times today on lesser injuries to his fellow soldiers, before becoming a casualty himself.

"Here." She leaned down, trying to keep her voice even. It wouldn't do to have him sense the panic that threatened to overwhelm her. "I have the medistat. Tell me what you need."

"You worry… too much." The young man gave a feeble grin, showing bloody teeth. This seemed to set off more coughing. He shut his eyes.

Stubborn, too much like me.

"Look at me. Look."

After what seemed an eternity, he did. His eyes glazed with agony.

"Good. That's good," she said. "You feel pain? That's good. That means you're still alive. You're afraid, right? Use it. It's fuel. Stay alive."

He shook his head, slowly. Then, once more he shut his eyes.

"Atilio," she whispered, watching the uneven rise and fall of his chest.

But he did not stir.

She slammed the kit onto the counter. The noise was explosive in the oppressive silence of the sanctuary.

"Sela."

Valen had returned. His hand squeezed her shoulder. The closest thing Sela had ever had to a friend, he had been her sergeant for six campaigns. In all that time he had never touched her or used her name in such a familiar way within earshot of the others until now.

Things were bad, steadily falling away to irrevocably skewed.

With arms as thick as runner bulkheads, Valen easily stood a full head taller than Sela. Although he looked lumbering and slow, his reflexes had saved her life more than once. He granted her a staggering level of loyalty that, at times like this, made her feel so unworthy. She had always suspected he harbored some sort of misguided romantic attraction to her. To her relief, he had never acted on it. Decca prevented it: the list of rules all breeders like Sela lived and died by. The cresters and commoners had the Fates. Breeders had Decca. Every booter knew Decca by heart. And every conscript had the rules drilled into place.

"Something is wrong." His voice was quiet, strained. "We should have done something by now. Fleet had to have a reason to just… withdraw." He did not say the words, but she shared his fear. Sela, having survived many campaigns, had come to develop a trust in her instincts for danger. That sense now told her something dire: *we have been abandoned.*

When they'd reached the extraction coordinates, they had found only an empty field. Her team had been exposed there and had no choice but to withdraw. The hump up the hill to find their present shelter had cost Atilio along the way when he set off a jury-rigged trigger wire near a doorway.

"You don't know that," Sela said.

"Commander. They're overdue—"

"Shut it." She grabbed the yoke of his armor.

"Yes, Commander."

She released her grip.

"Maybe we can rally up with another team that's been cut off too. Is there anything at all on vox? Other chatter?" she asked, removing her helm. She ran a

hand through her short, sweat-damp hair. Valen frowned his disapproval at this, but her skull felt like it were baking.

He leaned against her, pulling the throat mic away from his neck so the others would not hear.

"Vox is a mess. Insurgents got some kinda scrambler, can't make out a thing. I *think* Tertius and Quadra teams got extracted. Captain Veradin and his detail were first out."

"So it's just us, then."

At least Veradin was safe. There was a flutter of relief to know that, although Sela had been the one to point out to him his strategically unsound decision to join a ground attachment at all. Protocol dictated he should have used the remote command node, the RCD, on the *Storm King*, the Fleet transport carrier. But Veradin could be incredibly stubborn. All cresters were like that. Sela surmised it granted them a certain level of cred among the other higher ups to be seen throwing themselves into the fray. But not Veradin; Sela knew him too well for that. He had come onplanet because he did not want to put others at risk, even if they were just breeders, while he called orders from the safety of the *'King*.

Valen shrugged. "If we hold out till nightfall, we should be able to see if our ride's still in low orbit."

"Of course he's still there." She didn't remark on his lack of faith. Although protocols for subordinate-superior interaction were drilled into any breeder from day one, Sela seldom curbed the speech of those serving under her.

In her time as a platoon commander, she had developed her own philosophies of leadership. There were no parade grounds or inspections out here. There was life and death. The line between the two was only as good as your trust for the others that racked in the squadbay around you at night, and their trust of you. The cresters never seemed to grasp that.

"They'll come for us." She hoped Valen could not hear the unevenness in her voice. "Veradin is up there. He won't forget us."

"You believe that, boss?"

Her smile was grim. "As if there's a choice."

2

"Commander."

Sela glanced up from her vigil at Atilio's side. He had stopped grimacing. Perhaps that meant the pain pharms were working.

Rheg shoved a robed figure into the center of the altar room. The amber lights shone on the shaven head and sun-ravaged skin of his prisoner.

"Found him hiding in a chamber on the spinward side. Says he's a priest."

"I'm not a priest." The newcomer grimaced under Rheg's heavy grip, actually managing to sound appalled. "I'm a minor *sacerdos*. I've not been joined in the Order yet."

"Imagine my embarrassment," muttered Rheg sarcastically.

"*Sacerdos*?" Sela viewed the newcomer skeptically. "You have a designation then, Citizen?"

"Citizen!" He scoffed, plainly insulted. "I am a free man. Not a slave for your Council of First."

The man's accent was slight, but evident to Sela. The stranger used Commonspeak, the expected standard language for any citizen of the Known Worlds, but his intonations were those of someone who had grown up speaking Regimental Standard. Much like a soldier. Sela had developed an ear for it. On a nearly daily basis she listened to crester officers slaughter Common and Regimental with their sing-song, affected Eugenes accents.

Rheg clamped down more tightly on the priest's shoulder. "Commander Tyron wants your name!"

"Lineao… Jarryd Lineao," he grunted.

"Where are the others?" she said. "There must be others here."

Lineao drew his chin up and drew his shoulders back. "I volunteered to remain and care for the sanctuary. My brothers have fled to safety."

"Bricky." She snorted. "I'll give you cred for that."

He had to be lying. Only one remaining priest for a compound that seemed to sprawl well past the sanctuary? Whatever his reason to lie, she would deal with it later. For now there were more pressing matters.

"We have no directive for prisoners." Valen reached for his sidearm. He spoke now in Regimental to Sela, as was protocol in hostile presence. "He's a liability."

She stepped between them. "No. We need him."

Valen gaped. "Commander?"

But Sela was watching the expression on Lineao's face. He understood Regimental. Had to. Yet there was no call for a common citizen to speak Regimental. Her suspicions flared.

"If you're a priest, you must have healer's training." Sela returned to Commonspeak, continuing this newcomer's ruse.

Lineao looked from Valen to Sela. When he noticed Atilio's body on the altar, his eyes widened. "Yes… some."

"My meditech took a hit. Lost a lot of blood." Sela shoved the medistat kit against Lineao's chest. "Help him."

Valen snarled in protest. "Boss, you've got to be—"

"Sergeant, if you've discovered a miraculous means to restore Atilio, produce it now," Sela snapped.

Valen squared his shoulders and sneered at Lineao.

"I've sworn an oath to help those that the Fates guide into my Path," the priest said quietly as he took the kit from her.

"Well. They've dropped this one on your lap."

The altar room, although it had appeared primitive at first glance, was constructed with a holo-clear ceiling. As the light of the powerful suns sank below the horizon, Sela could now see the purple shimmer of the night sky through its electric scrim. A single bright star hung heavier than the rest. Solid, unblinking, it drew a slow graceful arc. The *Storm King*. Still there. *Fradin would not leave us.* The knot of her heart loosened the slightest bit.

Lineao closed the case of the medistat kit and made another inspection of the bandages covering Atilio's torso. Much of the bleeding had stopped. The young man continued to breathe in ragged hitches. But breathe nonetheless.

The priest shuffled over to her and extended the case. When Sela did not move to accept it, he left it at her feet like an offering.

"Well?" she asked. *Will he live? Please let him live.*

Lineao ran a grimy hand over his face. Without invitation, he collapsed beside her on the bench.

"I've done all I can," he sighed. "His injuries are too great for the supplies you have here. I am only one. Another healer might do better."

"I guess that's a no," she muttered, kicking the useless kit away. Her anger was indiscriminate: At Lineao, at the stupid inadequate kit, at the nameless faceless bastard who had taken out Atilio.

It was moments like this when she could understand why she existed. Sela suspected that she was made this way on purpose: easy to provoke to physical shows of anger. Her first impulse was often to rend and tear. But there was nothing here that had earned it.

And so she breathed deeply, slowly. She counted to a hundred. She did all the things Veradin had taught her to do. Sometimes it worked. But not in this instance.

Guess it's just not my night.

Sela stretched her neck, flexed and released her shoulders. The heat of Tasemar was damning. Hours ago she had shed the upper portion of her field armor. It was a move that was not protocol. She had earned yet another disapproving frown from Valen. He could be too protective at times. But he had kept his argument to himself and sauntered off to check on the fortifications.

"The Fates may protect your boy yet," Lineao offered, turning his gaze to the pictograph of the three women spanning the entire wall.

Sela sloshed the hydration matrix in her canteen thoughtfully. "Good thing he can't hear you call him a boy."

Atilio could be prideful, bordering on arrogant. In many ways he was still a booter with much to prove. He had put up a lot of swag at first, but she'd let the others in his team take care of that. The young meditech was good at what he did. He just needed to learn his place. It was an initiation of sorts; any soldier on her team had faced similar treatment.

"You regard him as such, like your child," Lineao replied.

Sela did not care for how he watched her as he said it.

"*My strength is the soldier beside me. I shall not abandon him*," Sela recited Decca. Eyes narrowing, she turned to focus on Lineao. "Your brothers don't seem to feel the same, *priest*. Abandoning you here."

"And your Kindred masters do not hold the same sentiment," he shot back. "They have yet to reclaim you."

"He will." Sela jerked her chin in the direction of the *Storm King*. "They will."

She knew it as surely as the breath that filled her lungs. Somewhere aboard that ship, her home for a large portion of her adult life, was an agitated Captain Jonvenlish Veradin. She pictured him storming the corridors, bellowing at anyone foolish enough to get in his way. That same familiar warmth filled her. For a moment, the worry about Atilio dulled.

"How long ago did you forsake us?" she asked the cleric in Regimental.

In the half-light, Lineao stiffened.

"I know you understand me. No need to keep pretending," Sela pressed. "I doubt they teach clerics Regimental."

"The years do not matter," he answered after a thoughtful silence.

She tipped her canteen in his direction in a casual salute. "I never get tired of being right."

"I imagine you have not told your men." He cast a wary glance around. True enough, Rheg would have made a special point of rendering pain on a deserter.

"Relax. You're no good to me or Atilio dead."

"I have done little to help him. And I fail to see what intelligence I can offer you, Commander. I am but a novice, a student of the Fates now."

"I'm not an Intelligence Officer, Lineao. And I'm not the torturing type. My job is to keep my people alive and get them back home."

"Then we wish the same things, Commander. I serve the Fates and seek to end what hostilities I can toward my people."

"Your… *people*," Sela said with a dry chuckle. He had deserted an enemy to the populace of this back-birth world. Now they were his *people*. "Then tell me… satisfy my curiosity about *your people*. All the intel I've seen indicates they lack the resources or training to organize insurrection. Did they have assistance, then? Some breakaway colony looking for a foothold in this sector?"

Lineao shook his head. "I know nothing of these matters, Commander. I live the simple life of a priest now."

"Uh huh," she muttered, unconvinced. "Then at least tell me why *no one* has advanced on our position yet. They must've figured we're here by now. Why not?"

Lineao raised his eyebrows. "You know what this place is, Tyron. It is sacred to them, to us. They hesitate to perform a warring act on this soil, for it would be a desecration."

"Desecration." She arched an eyebrow at the room. Fragments of pottery peppered the floor. Broken furniture lay in heaps. Atilio's blood soaked the altar cloth. "I'm glad we've preserved the site thus far."

"Humor. Interesting in a breeder like you," Lineao said, canting his head. It was the way he said the word, *breeder*, like a term for diagnosing an illness. He made it sound forgiving and damning in the same breath. The accepted term for the soldiers like Sela, who were specifically bred in the kennels, was *volunteer*. She suspected the term was used to make their existence more palatable to the cresters. Oddly, she had no recollection of anyone offering her a choice. Not that she or anyone of her team would have chosen differently.

"Use that word again and I'll tell the others our little secret, Lineao." She held his gaze. It was the stare she reserved for intimidation of quaking villagers. "They won't be nice like me."

But he wasn't buying.

Lineao nodded. "Why are *you* here, Commander?"

Sela gave a derisive snort. He seemed to oscillate between amusing and annoying. "I have my orders. You remember what those are, don't you?"

"Ah. Yes. *Orders*," he mocked. "How would you know what to do without your *orders*?"

"First knows what's best."

"I doubt that, Tyron. I think you do too."

"Be quiet," she hissed, gesturing at Atilio. "He needs rest."

Sela rose quickly, rocking the bench, and went to Atilio's side. She watched the agonizing rise and fall of his chest in the uncertain light.

"Will your boy's death be worth their orders?"

"Shut it!" She whirled, jabbing a finger at him. "You don't want to piss me off."

Lineao uttered an observant grunt and folded his hands inside his cloak. Another long stretch of silence rolled past, yet she still felt him watching her.

"The others have no idea, do they? Why you care for the boy as you do?" he asked.

Sela glared at him, feeling the blood build in her face. *Who did he think he was?*

"The boy… he's yours, isn't he? You may treat them all as your charges, but you know for certain that this one, Atilio, he is your flesh and blood. Your son."

She cleared the space between them in two great strides. Leaning down into his face, she planted her hands on the wall to either side of his head.

"You don't know a damned thing, priest." She said, teeth clenched.

But he did. He had ripped the secret Sela carried out into the hot, listless air for anyone to see. None of her team knew, not Veradin, not even Atilio.

Lineao made a placating gesture. "The bonds of a mother and child are great. It is unnatural to sever them the way First does."

Sela straightened but continued to loom over him. And still he did not recoil. He was on a mission now. Perhaps he thought he would manipulate her into freeing him, or, save her eternal spark, what they called a soul.

"Imagine, Tyron. In an army so vast, and the Council of First with powers so great, they cannot keep the Fates from reuniting you with your son."

The Council of First was not genuinely loved out here on the frayed edges. Anyone knew that. Sela was not a wide-eyed innocent. But First, and the power of the Regime and Fleet, were the thin lines that kept the citizens of the Known Worlds safe. The Regime kept the monsters away. The Council of First kept the lights from going out. Yet the farther from Origin, the less gratitude was shown for this.

"Valen!" she shouted, still staring down at Lineao. This time the priest did flinch. *Good.*

Her sergeant was instantly in the room. She realized that, in all likelihood, he had probably been in the corridor just outside.

"Watch him. I need air." Sela stormed from the chamber without waiting for a reply.

When Sela threw open the heavy doors that lead to the courtyard, the cool night air greeted her burning face. She nodded to the sentry.

Simirya rose. "All quiet here, sir. No movement."

"Spell you," Sela said. "Go eat. Rest."

As the gunner turned to leave, she paused. "Sir, how is Atilio?"

Of course, she would ask after him. Sela had suspected the two had shared down time more than once. Not that it was any business of hers. They were same rank. It didn't violate Decca.

Sela gave her a brittle smile. The word held all the trappings of a lie. "Fighting."

"I'll check him," Simirya offered before fading into the dark. Her moves were quiet with trained stealth.

With a weary sigh, Sela sank to her haunches against the wall. Eyes blurring with tears, she studied the darkness of the street below for movement.

Lineao had spoken the truth. But how could this stranger have known? *Was I not careful enough?*

3

Atilio was her son, the same mewling pink life that had been torn from her body eighteen years ago. The medic had presented her with a cursory glimpse and a glib rehearsed speech of praise before carrying the infant away.

A male. Sound body. Good infantry build for sure, Cadet Tyron. Well done.

It had been a relief. Not that the pain was of particular notice; she had been well-trained to deal with that. But it was a relief the boy was born whole. Because of the unregulated nature of his conception, she had heard rumors the child would be born skew, defective. This had been her punishment for a non-reg breeding and for refusing to name the father. Sanctioned breeding was a careful selection process. It was a nearly sacred art to the kennel wardens. In the end, the fear and rumors Sela had endured for the four weeks of the accelerated pregnancy had proved hollow.

She had not bothered to ask the designation that they had assigned to the child. Best not to know. Yet in the years after the boy's birth, she wondered about him. Sometimes she found herself studying the faces of young men who would be close to his age and wondering, *Could that be him? My son? Does he live and thrive? Does he ever wonder about me?*

Over time her curiosity faded, driven to the back. It was something to conceal. It was a liability. Nothing good would come from knowing. She could not have revealed herself to him without facing reassignment or punishment. The child might have been of her body, but he was not hers. He belonged to the Regime, as did Sela. On that, Decca was quite clear.

Sela's memory had always been solid. Things came to her like pictures, filed away for safekeeping. It mattered little as to the subject: numbers, coordinates, schematics. Everything got locked in. It never ceased to amaze her that others

could not do the same. She had learned to use this to her advantage, but this was an occasion when she considered it a curse.

When the string of seven numbers was called out carelessly by one of the medics as they marked the infant boy with his ident, they became etched in her memory. And eighteen years later, those same seven numbers appeared on the index of Atilio's file.

The young man had appeared across the logistics table from her one morning as she made her way through the hateful, yet unavoidable documentation expected of her rank.

"Atilio, Brin. Meditech class three. Reporting for assignment, Officer Tyron."

"Commander." Sela corrected, not looking up from her tasks on the logistics table. "You'll address me as 'sir' or 'commander'."

She sensed him fidget before he replied. "Apologies. Commander."

"Manners, even. I am impressed—" She looked up, finally tearing her attention away from the work. Her heart stammered.

Stelvick, in the flesh, stood across from her. But it couldn't be. That man was long dead, a harsh memory from her past. Yet this could have been his twin.

His coloring was different, more like hers. Dark blonde hair. Clever amber eyes taking in everything. But the line of the jaw, that same patrician nose. Stelvick's ghost.

Her eyes flitted over the ident number as her pulse raced. Not his ghost, but his son. The boy he fathered on her.

"Commander?" Atilio asked. He must have noticed something change, but did not move from his rigid stance of attention.

"Assembly at 0400. Report to Sergeant Vaden for team assignment." She looked back down at the table and feigned absorption with the notes there. Her throat grew tight. "Dismissed."

"I just wanted to say, sir." Atilio began. "It is an honor—"

"Honor. Got it. Try not to get killed," she said quickly, gesturing at the doorway. Still she could not look up. She was afraid of what she might do. "Dismissed, sub-officer."

He hesitated.

"Are you skew, booter? Go!" Sela shouted, practically running him out of the office.

The moment he stepped across the threshold, she triggered the door closed and cycled the lock. She slumped against the doorframe, heart pounding, not sure what she was feeling. But whatever the strange feeling, it could be a problem.

She raced back to the table to examine his file. The numbers, those same seven numbers, identical. The birth date. The location. The kennel information was redacted, of course. That

was always the case for personnel records. But had she the access, she knew what she would have found. Brin Atilio was her son.

Sela knew she should have reported the oversight and moved to have him reassigned. Or she could have simply rejected him as a candidate. Sela did neither. Her choice to keep Atilio with the team was born of selfish curiosity, she told herself.

For the first few weeks of his assignment, Sela watched Atilio for that connection, that thing that made knowing him so dangerous and forbidden by Decca. She chose to be harder on him in particular and resolved not to show him favor.

Yet, every engagement or exercise, she felt compelled to cast a careful eye on him. She told herself she was protecting the valuable asset of a meditech—a role that was hardly savored by other breeders when the emphasis from day one was on combat skills. It meant in addition to being shot at, they got the privilege of lugging around fifteen kilos of crap no one hoped they would need. They gave battle pharms to ward off fatigue and dispel pain; they patched new unwanted holes in you. They did things that kept your ass alive and let you fight on. It took the right kind of soldier to fill that role: Temperament. Compassion. Intelligence. Atilio's father had none of those. A part of Sela feared what his son may have inherited from him.

Her fears were soon dispelled. Atilio proved well-balanced and so quick to adapt. He assessed a situation and moved with decisiveness. His actions seemed deft and well-practiced – as though he possessed skills well beyond this novice posting.

Breaking her own self-imposed rules of limited interaction with him, Sela once asked him about this as he carefully arranged the contents of his medistat kit during a mission prep.

"I just sort of … remember, sir." Atilio grinned slightly, tapping his temple. "Like a habit. Show me something once. It just seems to get stuck in here."

His smile faltered when he looked up at her. She could only guess what expression she wore. But in that moment something within her seemed to change. It was like walking out of cool shadow into a patch of warm sunlight. It was the moment that marked the difference between *knowing* Atilio was her son and truly *feeling* it. He was a part of her. He was *hers*, pure and simple.

And what good did that indulgent possessiveness serve? Or her protectiveness over him?

It did not matter now. Mother or commander, she should be with him. She pressed thumbs against her shut eyelids, forcing back tears. Sighing, Sela got to her feet and went back inside.

"I am only a novice, but I can hear your transgressions," Lineao said.

Sela frowned, turning away from Atilio. The sanctuary had been so quiet when she returned from the courtyard that she had honestly thought the priest had fallen asleep sitting upright on the bench.

He just didn't know when to give up, did he?

"My trans-*whats*?"

"The wrongs you have committed to offend the Fates."

She snorted. He had to be joking. But Lineao only granted her his back and then somberly knelt before the depiction of the Fates on the wall. In a low voice he muttered a meaningless pattern of words.

Prayer, she guessed.

After making sure Valen was not nearby, she moved closer.

"Why?" she asked. She was standing over him now, staring at the top of his shaven head.

"It's my duty to the Fates to guide all pilgrims along their Path."

"I'm not a pilgrim."

"That is something that you do not decide."

"No, I mean…why abandon your post? To become a priest, of all things?"

"Because it is my Path."

"Your *Path*? You were a soldier of the Regime. That is what I'd call a Path."

"One of many possible for me."

"That's incredibly convenient, isn't it?"

Lineao shook his head and sighed. His voice took on a tone as if he were teaching a child.

"Commander, with each decision, you choose a Path. Each decision along the way is much like charting the course of one of your carriers. I was like you. I was a soldier. I had never made a decision for myself that really mattered. Kill here. March there. The Regime had always commanded my Path." He thrust his palms out to the ruined room. "Then the Fates intervened. They brought me here, to where I was truly needed."

"You abandoned your post. That's a violation of Decca."

Why even listen to his nonsense of Paths and decisions?

"Decca," he spat the word. "Belief in Decca is where uncertainty lives. Your Council of First knows this. It is about control. Their control over you. Decca is merely a list of rules to keep you like a child, to keep you ignorant of the worlds beyond their reach."

He said it with such matter-of-fact arrogance that she gaped at him. Soldiers were permanently "retired" for speaking such things.

"Tyron, you're a soldier now," he continued. "But certainly you must long for a different Path than the one the Regime has forced upon you. Surely, if you so truly believed in Decca, you would have reported their error in assigning your offspring under your command. Yet, you chose to keep that secret."

She refused to grant him the satisfaction of knowing he was right.

"No one *forced* me to be a soldier. It is the duty for which I was born."

"Straight from the hallowed tome of Decca. The mantra of the *volunteer*." He drew the word out, full of ridicule. "Your Kindred masters call you *volunteer*, because to think of you differently would be uncivilized. It would acknowledge slavery—an outlaw act that they pretend to find repugnant. Yet they enslave entire worlds and breed soldiers to do it."

"No. I shouldn't be talking to you about this." Sela turned away, looking toward the door.

She should find Valen, see if the others had rested. See that the munitions check was completed. But it was so hard. Lineao had tapped into the desperation that grew with each passing hour. His words seemed to hover on the same wavelength as that quiet voice that kept saying: *you have been abandoned... left to die... help is not coming.*

"Don't tell me you fear words." Lineao chuckled.

"I don't. But this is lunacy!" She leaned down, hissing the words against his ear. "Do you know what I think? I think you came here and one of their priests whispered this same insanity into your ears and it burrowed in. It infected you. *That* is why there is Decca."

"It was difficult for me too... at first."

"Don't compare yourself to me." She prodded his shoulder with her knee.

In that moment, she hated his quiet patient tone, hated the stench of the incense, and hated the beauteous pity painted on the faces of the women on the walls. Their expressions contained serene understanding; their eyes seemed able to peer into her soul. She found their forgiveness suffocating. And above all, she hated the tiny niggling *thing* in her that wanted to know more. Sela took angry strides to the outer sanctum, but pivoted back.

"I am a soldier of the Regime. It is my *Path*," she said as loud as she dared. "I serve with honor for as long as I breathe."

"Then what? One day they'll reward you by making you a Citizen?" Lineao sneered. "Have you ever met a Citizen that was once a breeder, Tyron? Will your masters one day call you their equal? Perhaps your Kindred captain that I hear you praise so much?"

Sela froze. The priest had felt around in the dark unknown of her heart and pulled at the loosened threads there. Was it that plain to everyone, her feelings for Veradin? So that even an observant stranger would notice?

"It happens. Everyone knows it." She could have winced at how childlike it sounded.

"Believing *that* lie—*that's* lunacy, Tyron."

"Enough."

"There is more to you than a simple foot soldier. These others you command, perhaps that is the only life they envision, but in you I can see a deeper intelligence. There's hunger in you. It is never satisfied by the hollow lies of the Regime and their rules, their commandments of Decca. You have consumed their lies for years, but you are always starving, while their own adherence to Decca is a matter of convenience."

Her hands shook. A tightness invaded her throat. "Stop."

"You wonder about the great hidden wheels that turn the Known Worlds. You wonder about the Kindred masters that command you. All the while you go where you're told, fight where they tell you to fight. You do these things, but there's that hunger in your clever brain. It's a simple question but powerful enough to guide your Path, if you are brave enough. It's a simple thing: *why?*"

It was muscle memory, instinct that made Sela draw her sidearm. A threat evoked her response. The priming trigger's high pitched whine was the only sound as she pressed the muzzle against the priest's temple.

"No more words, Lineao. That's it."

But he did not cower. He bowed his head and returned to more muttered prayers.

This did not satisfy her. She wanted him to fight back or pelt her with curses. The anger commanded her to rip and tear. She could fight what she could see and touch, not his stupid words. Yet, they stung and invaded her ears, burrowing into her brain, tunneling to where they could never be retrieved.

This must be what it was like to be infected.

Staring down at the back of his shaven head, she thumbed the priming chamber closed and holstered her weapon. With a tremulous breath, she pressed her fists against the sides of her head.

Count to a hundred, a thousand. Breathe.

On unsure feet she went to the doorway and sagged against the rough stone of the archway.

"Commander?" It was Valen's voice.

Sela jerked upright. Her sergeant had been standing there unannounced for some time. *How much had he heard?* Where there had always been fierce worship in his gaze, she imagined there was doubt.

"Sergeant." She had to clear her throat and try again. "Valen."

"Nominal, Commander?" His wary expression fell on Lineao.

"Yes. Report."

"Signal hit on vox. Old code, but valid. We have an extraction. Got coordinates. Two click hump from here." The relief in his voice was apparent.

The tight grip on her lungs slackened. There was a flood of relief knowing that she would soon never see this room again.

Valen studied her. Then she realized why. Sela felt for her vox-com's earwig, realizing that she had actually removed it with her chest armor. Her throat mic was missing too. She felt exposed, as if caught in a guilty act.

"Excellent, Valen. Time?"

He glanced at his chronometer: "Eighty-six minutes."

"Send an advance—"

"Already done, boss." Valen's eyes moved over to the altar. "How's Atilio, sir?"

She turned to regard her son's form and slowly shook her head.

"Glory all," he responded.

They regarded each other in uncomfortable silence. Then Valen spoke: "This one gonna be a problem, boss?" He tilted his head toward Lineao.

"I'll deal with him."

As the dawn became a fresh bruise on the horizon, Sela remained at Atilio's side. She watched as he stopped fighting to breathe. Fitting, she realized. The one to see him draw his first breath was there to see him expel his last.

My strength is the soldier beside me; I shall not abandon him.

For all of Lineao's admonishment of Decca, the words still rang true. She would not permit her son's body to remain here to rot under alien suns. He would go back to the *King* for burial in space.

Sela felt them watching her. Valen and Rheg. Simirya. Even Lineao. They were waiting for her to speak, to move. Time was not an ally. The rest of the team was a blur of activity, prepping for the extraction. This time, Sela was the impediment.

She leaned over Atilio and etched his face into her faultless memory. Even now, she was astonished by how much he resembled his father, a man she reviled. But Atilio was also part of her.

I have failed you. She removed the ident tag from his neck.

"Boss." Valen was at her elbow. He did not have to say more. Time was up.

She nodded, not trusting her voice. It would not do to have them hear it break.

Valen and Rheg moved with quiet efficiency. They bundled Atilio's body into the large, heavy bag.

After they trundled her son away, Sela remained with Lineao in the silent, ruined room. Her numb fingers toyed with Atilio's ident tags before she strung them next to her own.

How very much like his birth. Swept away by strangers.

"I am sorry for your loss, Commander. No mother should see her child die," Lineao said.

"He is not mine. Not anymore," she corrected, turning to face him.

This is why there is Decca. This is why it is dangerous for a mother to know her children. We are soldiers, not families. I was foolish to think this would end any differently.

This grief, this pain she felt was self-indulgent. She could not afford the luxury of it. Her team needed her.

"And what of me, Commander?" Lineao folded his hands against his waist.

"What about you?" She felt drained and raw.

Only one other man in the world made her feel as if her thoughts were being broadcast: Jonvenlish Veradin. In her captain, a man she trusted, it was comfort. In Lineao, it evoked a poisonous unease.

She regarded him, measuring. The priest had more reasons to stay behind than lighting candles or burning incense. But whoever or whatever he was hiding in the compound had not threatened her team and she was willing to overlook it.

Her own words surprised her when she said: "We're leaving. My team still has active kill orders. Stay out of sight. Do you understand, Lineao?"

He nodded slightly. "Understanding is the quest that drives us all, Commander."

His patient tone made her want to throw a rock at his shaven head.

As she crossed the threshold, she heard him say, "The Path before you is a new one this day, Sela Tyron, if only you can see it. May the Fates guide you until we meet again."

She paused and inhaled a stilling breath.

May the Fates guide me off this ball of dust and back to my rack.

A strange hollow feeling had invaded her. There was no word to truly describe it. Not in Regimental. Not in Commonspeak. It was a sensation that told her nothing was going to be the same again. The thought filled her with dread.

4

The runner was a welcome sight, abused-looking though it was. It graced the field in the riot of rust-colored dust kicked up by its engines. Nearby, a single stryker flitted down like a fragile insect. It had also seen better days.

Sela helped Valen carry Atilio up the ramp, the bag sagging into a boneless crescent under his lifeless weight.

He had been such a tiny infant. She ground her molars.

The runner's interior was jammed. The craft was meant to hold far fewer personnel and their gear. Gaining altitude would prove interesting.

Why just one runner for a nearly complete team? It didn't add up, but exhaustion told her to be grateful.

Sela turned to Valen and shouted over the roar of the engines. "Over full. I'll take the jump seat on the stryker."

"Stay, sir." Her sergeant nudged her back up the ramp of the runner. "I'll go. You need to be with them."

He was right, of course. The team still needed her, as impossible as that felt at the moment.

She nodded. And he disappeared into a swirl of dust.

Feeling suddenly exhausted, she slogged back up the ramp into the belly of the runner. It felt as if the gravity of this hot, dusty world had increased ten-fold and would not permit her to leave. The ramp whined closed behind her. She rounded the corner past the ops station and gave the pilot a quick nod. *All set.*

Turning, she collided with Captain Jonvenlish Veradin. As the deck lurched with the runner's burdened ascent, he grabbed her by the upper arms to steady them both. Sela looked up into his lopsided smirk.

"Captain," her voice pulled into a low warning. He shouldn't be there. It was not protocol. Having him personally oversee an extraction was too dangerous. She would never have allowed it, and he knew it.

"Sorry I'm late," he replied. "Got distracted." It was his attempt at a joke.

Sela's scowl was half-hearted. "You're here just the same, sir."

Another jolt shook the runner. He reached for the frame of an equipment bin to steady himself as she collided with his chest.

Sela quickly righted herself and grabbed a handful of cargo webbing for support. He extended his hand and she clasped his forearm, holding on perhaps a little too tightly.

"The casualty…" he began.

"Atilio, our meditech," she said, barely audible over the protest of the engines.

"I'm sorry, Ty." He squeezed her forearm once and let his hand drop. Of course Veradin did not know. To Sela's captain, the young meditech was one of many under his command.

"It's worse than we know. Isn't it, sir?"

There was a final lurch as the runner escaped the grip of Tasemar's grav.

"That's the unofficial motto, right?" Veradin allowed his lopsided smirk to re-emerge. He had a way of looking proud of himself and guilty at once.

Valen had said the vox code was an old one. The *Storm King* had sent only one troop runner and one stryker for air support. Things had gone wrong, vastly, if Veradin were chancing his own life in this overloaded runner.

"What did you do, sir?" Sela pressed.

"I did what I had to, Ty."

The moment the runner alit on the *Storm King*'s hangar floor, the ramp unfolded to reveal two waiting officers: a lieutenant colonel and some Fleet skew. Sela had never seen either of them before. As they led Veradin away to the XO's office he gave Sela a glance over his shoulder. She sighed and shook her head.

She had gotten the story from Veradin on the brief flight back on the runner. He had told her that the *Hester*, the *Storm King*'s sister ship, had been delayed for an engagement in the Denor system. The *Storm King*'s captain, a crester skew named Silva, had decided to abandon his post at Tasemar in favor of glory-

seeking at Denor. After all, delivering breeders to take care of half-assed rebellions among the primitives of a fringe world was not going to carve his name in victory and raise his station. Silva had gauged, incorrectly, that the ground detachment he had essentially abandoned there could hold its own while the *King* attended to this new, more interesting call.

But Veradin had refused to leave them. Her captain had "borrowed" a troop transport and a stryker to effect their retrieval. Of course, he'd had help. Quadra team, his security escort during his initial extraction, had taken control of the flight deck while Veradin and some volunteers had commandeered the craft. It was impossible for a carrier to spool up with a hangar bay still active. So Veradin made sure it stayed that way.

Captain Silva then had no choice but to delay the departure of the *Storm King*. It would have been tantamount to political suicide for Silva to jeopardize a fellow crester, even a peasant Kindred like Veradin.

It explained why everyone on the flight deck seemed so enthralled with her team's arrival. Yet even after Veradin and his escorts had disappeared into the bustle of the hangar, Sela realized they were still watching her.

She and her team had been given up for dead, after all. Yet there they stood, immortal as the Fates. She didn't feel like one, standing stiffly at attention as Atilio's body was rolled out of the bay.

Ignoring the obvious stares of the Fleet skews, she made sure her two other wounded personnel were herded off to medical, despite their protests. The entire time, she sensed a nearly electric charge in the air. It was as if a storm had blown through, leaving not destruction, but disorder and edginess in the carrier. She sensed Veradin had been the harbinger of that storm.

Captain, do you realize what you have done?

"Valen!" Sela bellowed, staring down the few remaining onlookers consisting of mostly Fleet techs. It worked. They went back to their duties and found less obvious means to stare.

She saw her sergeant turn away from what seemed to be an intense conversation with a female Fleet tech. He jogged around a pallet lifter laden with the ordinance crates that had never made it to Tasemar's surface.

"Who's the tech?" she asked.

"Cade." Valen canted his chin. "Our stryker escort. She's actually a deck pilot, sir."

"Incredible," Sela muttered in disbelief. Veradin had somehow convinced or coerced a Fleet tech with rudimentary skills into piloting a stryker to land on Tasemar. Where it not so risky or stupid, she would have been impressed.

There was going to be fall out, she guessed. How bad and how far it reached was up to Veradin and his seemingly unparalleled ability to talk his way out of trouble.

Around them the flurry of the hangar bay was increasing. The *Storm King* was prepping for spool-up. Velo drive spool-ups were big maneuvers, often requiring hours of prep time. Fleet relied on mapped flex points– specific locations, invisible to the naked eye, where the fabric of space was stretched thin over a conduit passage– for travel between planetary systems governed by First. At flex points, velo drives enabled ships like the *Storm King* to punch a hole through that thinness and propel itself along the conduit. It required a great deal of energy, but reduced travel between systems to days or hours, instead of decades. But it was a tedious and dangerous business. Calculations had to be perfect, with everything in precise order. Otherwise, the vessel could end up on the other side as so much debris.

Fleet techs and other support personnel were buttoning up in the hangar and in a hurry to make up for the delay. Infantry was definitely unwelcome to linger here.

She turned back to Valen. "Make sure D company get some rack time. Once the captain is done getting yelled at, we'll debrief with the team leaders. I've no doubt there's going to be mop up on this one."

Valen shifted, raking a hand over the back of his bare head. "Sir, about that…"

"What."

"Captain Veradin mandated down time… for everybody. Next twenty hours. No exceptions."

"He did *what*?" She glowered at Valen. The captain had said nothing to her before he was led away. Why would he subvert the chain of command? But she knew the answer. "When?"

"Just before… you know." He jerked his chin in the direction of the XO's office. It was plain Valen found the reaction to the captain's stunt just as worrisome.

Her hand went to her vox: "Captain Veradin. Acknowledge."

There was a long pause, then Veradin's voice answered: *"You need a break, T). Not just your team. You too."*

"Sir, you—"

The vox line went silent.

Sela roamed the *Storm King* for nearly three hours. It was easy to do on a vessel the size of this carrier. Her course took her through the hab levels meant for infantry. The outer sections were the realm of tactical, engineering— places she had seldom needed to venture. A soldier could spend entire tours and never look at anything more than the hab and hangars.

She did not exactly disobey Veradin's order to take down time. After all, the captain had never specified how she was to take it. In truth she was reluctant to return to the squadbay that she shared with her team, no matter how badly her body needed the rack time. She would not be able to bear their attention, feeling—despite their calls of gratitude and praise—that she had somehow failed them.

Of course, if she were actually hungry, she could eat. But the commissary would mean more stares or worse, blatant questions from the other platoon commanders. It would mean talking about Veradin's stunt, or about Atilio. She could seal herself in a rec suite to sleep. But she knew the moment she lay down and shut her eyes she would see Atilio's face, or hear the priest's voice.

So, she wandered.

Finally, Sela found herself lingering in the passage that led to the officer's hab level. It was as close as she dared get to the restricted area that belonged to the cresters. She leaned against the wall of a shadowed alcove. Absently, she fingered the sets of tarnished ident tags strung about her neck and very specifically avoided thinking about what had happened on Tasemar.

Two techs passed. They granted her a wide berth, but she did not miss their secretive, awe-struck expressions. One of them had the nerve to stare too long.

Sela drew her shoulders up and glowered back. He quickened his pace and looked away. The techs were frail things: pale with shaven heads. Never had she witnessed a Fleet tech set foot planetside. It was rumored they were forbidden to do so, for fear of 'tamination from simple air and soil.

Turning, she caught her ghostlike reflection in the darkened glass of the portal. Little wonder the tech had stared. Her dark blonde hair stood up in unruly spikes. Dirt coated her utilities. Her son's blood had dried on her hands in maroon patches. She supposed that to them she appeared as some battlefield wraith.

She had already heard what the Fleet personnel had taken to calling her: *Sela the Immortal.* If she had not found it so pitiful, she would have laughed. As if she

were some kind of legend. Hardly. A legend is supposed to take care of her soldiers. A hero would not watch her son die. Or have these alien thoughts swimming in her head.

Every soldier longed to be a hero, but the incident at Tasemar had brought her unwelcome attention. The stories of the daring retrieval launched by Captain Jonvenlish Veradin for his lowly breeder soldiers had spread quickly through the carrier. And now, just has she had predicted in the hangar, Sela waded through the fallout. There were whispers and stolen glances. There would be the inevitable rumors to circle about her taking rec with her captain. But they were just that—rumors. Decca forbid the pairing between soldier and commander and specifically against breeder and crester.

Sela was beginning to lose her resolve. The niggling voice of doubt had spread further, feeding her exhaustion and grief. She moved away from the wall, ready to slink back to the squadbay. Then she saw Veradin round the corner to the habs. Incredibly, he did not look like a man who had just gotten the reaming of his career. In fact, he looked almost proud of himself. She knew from experience that this most likely meant one thing—he had managed once more to talk his way out of a near-catastrophe.

"You have downtime for the next eighteen hours," he said. "Are you planning to spend it wandering the hallways, Commander Tyron?"

"Captain." She saluted. "A word?"

"Is it your turn to reprimand me?" he said with a brief chuckle, returning a lazy version of her salute.

Sela did not do well with his jokes, not often. He had poor timing. But it didn't stop him from trying. Cresters were difficult for her to gauge. They joked, told falsehoods and embellished. It was the same with conscripts, the non-breeders who sometimes found themselves forced into service with the Regime.

But weary and raw, she had lost whatever patience she could sometimes call upon. "As your second, it is my duty to point out actions which are deemed strategically unsound, sir."

"Oh, Fates. You too?" He rolled his eyes. Veradin had once pointed out that *strategically unsound* was her favorite thing to say and went so far as to suggest she have it tattooed somewhere on her body. An observation that, had it been delivered by anyone else, would have resulted in bodily harm.

"Captain, our extraction from Tasemar—"

"I've already been formally reprimanded by the fleet XO. But he came down on my side. Silva was wrong to make the call for infantry. He never had formal orders to withdraw—"

"Captain," Sela blurted. "I don't *care*."

Veradin gaped. He seemed startled that she had interrupted him. "Then speak, Commander."

"You put yourself at great risk, sir. No other Kindred would have done what you did today."

"Ty…." He put up his hands in a staying gesture.

"You challenged a Fleet Captain. And we are not even conscripts… we're only—"

"Essential members of my team that I would never be able to replace." He forestalled the word she was going to use. *Breeders*. Sela had never heard him use that word around her or her team. It was as if he found it offensive.

Veradin stepped closer. "Commander—"

"If you do a foolish thing like that again...sir." Her voice threatened to break. She jabbed at his sternum with an accusing finger. "I will shoot you myself, if just to teach you a lesson."

Veradin gave her a bemused grin. Somewhere beneath the heavy dull ache heaped upon her by the past twenty hours, she felt that lovely glimmer of warmth.

She stepped closer, peering into his brown eyes. "There are those who would find losing you a great tragedy. There are those of us who could not bear it. Do you understand me, sir?"

His grin disappeared. "I would never want to disappoint those people."

She looked down, shoulders sagging.

"What's happened, Sela?" Veradin asked quietly. He could always seem to read her mind, guess her moods.

"Atilio. I failed him."

"You aren't responsible. There is a limit. You have to leave *some* of it to the Fates."

Her next words seemed to travel from far away. She had no intention of uttering them, but they appeared nonetheless:

"Captain, have you ever known one of my kind to become a Citizen?"

The question seemed to catch him completely off guard. He hesitated, then looked away as he dragged a hand across the back of his neck. "I'm not going to lie to you..."

"I see."

Somewhere, Lineao was probably smiling with smug satisfaction.

"Why did you ask me that?"

"On the planet, there was a cleric to the Fates…"

Sela stopped abruptly, as if realizing her surroundings. She perceived a subtle movement in the darkness beyond her captain's shoulder. There at the junction of wall and doorframe nested a crawler, an automated unit used for ship-wide surveillance.

She had wanted to tell Veradin about the deserter-turned-priest, about watching the *Storm King* from planetside, about the warring jangle of doubts now taking root in her mind. And about the anguish of watching her son die without ever being able to tell him that his mother had known him, was proud of him.

"I apologize, sir." Sela lowered her head. "I've already taken too much of your time."

"No apology necessary." But he was studying her, his gaze questioning.

She glanced up. A second crawler had appeared on the ceiling above them.

"I should go, sir."

He returned Sela's salute. As she began to turn, he pressed a hand on her shoulder. "No."

She looked down at his hand, then up at him. "Sir?"

"What did you want to tell me?"

"This was wrong of me, sir. I shouldn't even be here uninvited." Her voice was barely audible above the rustle of fabric and the whisper of the environmentals. "It's not Decca—"

"I know Decca. The fleet XO just spent the past three hours reminding me of it. And right now, Nyxa can have it." He squeezed her shoulder. "You came here to tell me something. I want to know what's bothering you."

Sela was intensely aware of the crawlers now, but did not pull away.

"Captain," she warned, casting a wary glance around. He could be so careless, and nearly contemptuous toward Decca. He had never been raised as a breeder.

"Sela, what is it? You can tell me."

Can I tell you? Would you understand? Trust was not the question. She bore it wholeheartedly for this man.

"Atilio—" she began.

Heavy footfalls echoed from the corridor. Sela pulled away from him and straightened her shoulders.

"Captain Veradin."

Two troopers tromped into the corridor, shattering the strange tension. From the gleaming black of their lowered visors and heavy oversized armor, it was easy to tell they were SSDs: suppression and surveillance deployment for internal lawgiving and infractions.

Sela licked her lips. Something was wrong. The crawlers had only just appeared and she and Veradin had committed no real transgression in their interaction. Although she had danced tantalizingly close.

Her hand moved to the spot on her thigh where her sidearm would be, had she not surrendered it to the armory tech.

"Speak," Sela demanded and took a half step forward, barring the path between the SSDs and her captain.

"Captain Veradin, come with us." The guard ignored Sela who stiffened at the slight.

"Why?" Veradin asked.

"You're under arrest, sir."

"What charges, sub-officer?" Sela blurted. "Under whose authority?"

The smaller trooper seemed to regard her for the first time. Although it was impossible to see her expression under her lowered visor, Sela detected the slightest tone of reverence in the woman's voice. "Stand aside, Commander Tyron. Please."

"Whose orders?" Sela repeated.

The SSD's shared a look before the female one answered. "Officer Trinculo."

"The *Information* Officer? Silva pulled the Information Officer into this?" Veradin said, astonished. "I've had assurances from the XO that the issue had been resolved."

It was absurd, even by crester standards. Silva had wrangled Veradin's arrest for what amounted to a conflict of egos. This was not something to appear even briefly on the radar of someone as powerful as Trinculo. His authority superseded even the battlegroup's commander.

"On what charges?" Veradin demanded.

"Sir, the IO gave explicit instructions—."

"You're not taking him," Sela growled, filled with challenge.

"Commander Tyron, our orders are from the IO. If you do not comply, you will punished."

"Fine. Punish away," she snapped.

"Ty, stand down." Veradin grabbed her arm.

"Captain?"

"You heard me. Stand down."

He kept his eyes on the two SSDs, but his expression told her something else. He saw it too. This was far more serious than a pissing match with an over-inflated ship's captain. The two officers showing up in the bay to lead Veradin to the XO had been for theatrics, drama for everyone to see. It sent a message of discipline being served out, even among the cresters. But this action was secretive. Not the way Regime did things. This was wrong.

Sela realized that the two crawlers had disappeared. Incredibly, *this* scene was not being recorded.

She turned her focus back on the two troopers and gauged her odds. With a little luck, she might be able to disarm the one on the left before…

"No. You can't, Ty. Think." Veradin whispered as he stepped past her. He turned his back to the troopers and clasped his hands behind his head. "Breathe. Count to ten."

Panic washed over Sela as she watched them place the restraints on him, like some common criminal.

"Ty," he said, facing her. His expression was stony, jaw set. "Do nothing. This is not your fight. I order you to stand down. I'm going to take care of this. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir. I hear you."

She saluted him, arms stiff. Technically, she had just lied to her captain. Sela had no intention of obeying his orders.

5

Count to ten. Breathe.

The trick Veradin had taught her still wasn't working.

"Officer Trinculo."

Sela nearly regretted speaking when Trinculo's flat gaze moved over her. His mouth pulled into a distasteful bow. It was as if he had been expecting her. His frown deepened as he studied her head to toe. At that moment, she was fully aware of her mired utilities and grime-covered face. Her appearance might have evoked awe in the Fleet techs, but Trinculo was far from impressed. No doubt he would have expected her in full dress before even considering appearing at his hatchway.

She did not even *own* a dress uniform.

The stout older man looked back down at his desk and resumed his reading. She stared uncertainly at the top of his thinning silver hair.

"Officer Trinculo." Sela repeated. "Sir?"

"Commander," he said, seemingly engrossed by the documents on his desk. "Are you lost?"

"I would speak with you, sir."

"It is little wonder Captain Veradin is arrested if he does not discipline his second for her unacceptable attitude and manners to superiors. Perhaps Veradin's *correction* is overdue then." Trinculo said with a bitter sigh, leaning back in his chair.

She flinched. Not much. Just enough to earn a renewed scowl from Trinculo. She swayed from foot to foot then looked uncertainly about the corridor.

"Are you going to enter or jitter about in my doorway, Commander?" he asked, perhaps realizing she was not going to leave.

She stepped into his suite, ducking her head beneath the low-set jamb. Immediately she saluted. When it was apparent he would not return her salute, Sela snapped into a straight line, eyes firmly fixed on the seal of First set in the bulkhead above his desk. Her fists folded against her thighs.

She began, "Captain Veradin's arrest—"

"Commander Tyron, you will cease your inquiry."

"This is a mistake," she blurted.

"Mistake? You judge the decisions of First and call them mistakes? All I know is my duty, Commander. Does that make you wiser than me as well?" Incredulity filled his voice.

Her eyes widened. "First? Then it was not Silva…"

"You will cease this, Tyron, if you value your position. You have already endangered your career because of the wayward influence of Captain Veradin."

His *influence*? Her eyes left the seal over his shoulder and fell on his face.

"Perhaps it was an oversight to appoint one of his kind as your captain, that damnable Miri sect with their high-handed preaching of equality for breeders… of all things." Trinculo seemed to nod to himself in agreement. "He has done you a disservice by treating you in such a way to make you think you are special… equal."

The open insult to Veradin made her furious, but she held her tongue.

"Do you think I am blind, Tyron? I know of your… *inordinate* loyalty to Veradin. As a soldier of the Regime, you have a sworn oath to uphold the teachings of Decca. He is your superior. You are his subordinate in more ways, may I point out, than one." The disgust was plan in his expression.

Rumors and half-truths were his business, Sela realized. Of course, Trinculo had heard the stories. But they were just stories. Regardless, she felt the flush invade her face.

"You will quit this… adolescent fawning at once."

He rose and stepped around his desk, hands clasped behind his back as if he were loath to chance touching her.

"Why risk everything for a half-imagined romance with an officer who is clearly off limits to a breeder such as yourself? You must obey Decca, Commander Tyron."

"Captain Veradin and I have never—"

"You disobey Decca, you disobey First."

Sela drew her chin up. She looked directly into his face now. Her words were edged with frost. "First would have seen us die, abandoned on that planet. Death without honor is not Decca. Should not the same Decca guide First as well? Is it not interesting how First decides when Decca is convenient or not?"

Incredibly, she heard Lineao's words coming from her own mouth.

"Enough!" Trinculo's hands curled into fists.

"Captain Veradin is why I am alive. Not First."

"Jonvenlish Veradin is dead quite soon. He will be collected at the next FP transfer." He leaned closer. No more yelling from him, but a soft steely voice. "Tyron, do you wish to join him? I can grant your fondest wish and see to it you are shackled at his side."

Dead. They were going to kill him.

She blinked. Her shoulders sagged and her breathing hitched. It felt as if something within her had crumpled. She was hardly aware of stepping closer.

"Do *you* not ask why, Officer Trinculo?" Her voice was quiet, almost introspective. "*Why* does First destroy an officer that has served with unwavering loyalty? What are the charges against him?"

"They are of no concern to you, Tyron."

"Sir, Captain Veradin has—"

"This decree was issued by First. It is sufficient for me. That should be sufficient for you, breeder." He jabbed a bony finger into her sternum. "Whatever thoughts are loose in that spongy mass you call a brain, Tyron, you are wise to ignore them."

"He is innocent." Her throat tightened under the threat of tears.

"Innocence. Guilt. These are things judged by our betters." He leaned close, his chin nearly bumping into hers. "First ordered your birth and can order your death, breeder. You will forget Captain Veradin. Understood?" His mouth was a compressed white hook.

She stared at him, unblinking.

"Am I clear, Commander Tyron?"

"Crystal. Sir." She spat the words.

"You were never in this room, Tyron." He turned his back on her, returning to his chair. "You will never return to this room. Or speak of this again."

She did not wait for Trinculo to dismiss her.

Count to ten. Count to a hundred. Breathe.

Not working!

The shower's icy stream pelted her scalp. Sela leaned her forehead against the blissfully cool tile. The water cut tiny valleys into the collected grime that covered her body. Around her feet small puddles of mud collected, another memento of Tasemar that refused to leave her.

The showers were abandoned at this time in the *Storm King*'s duty cycle. It was one of the few places she could be alone to think.

A quiet, formless sobbing tried to escape her throat. It had been a very long time since she had done this. Last time she had cried, or the closest to it, was back in the kennels, after what had happened with Stelvick. And for the first time in a very long time she felt just as powerless as she had then.

Sela had hated Jonvenlish Veradin at first. She specifically remembered wishing him ill from the moment she had heard of his assignment as the new battalion leader. She had not yet seen the man, but already fantasized a less-than-charming end to his career.

When the former captain, an ancient bastard named Ithrall, had kicked it in his sleep, Sela had been granted probationary command over the three platoons of D Company. Field promotions like this were not unprecedented. They were often temporary and made out of necessity. Their battlegroup had been engaged in a conscription sweep near the Allights, with trained reinforcements from Origin delayed by nearly a year. With Ithrall's death, Sela was the most senior among the platoon commanders.

She had grown accustomed to the role and made the mistake of thinking of it as her own when Jonvenlish Veradin appeared out of nowhere, brandishing his crester status to claim her command.

A typical Kindred. Typical crester.

Clearly still, she could remember standing at attention, wronged and full of righteous fury, in what was now *his* ops room. Veradin practically lounged in the room's only chair. He propped his glossy black boots at the edge of what was now *his* logistics table. The collar of his jacket was undone, tunic belt loosened. Distractedly, he raked his fingers through his short dark brown hair while reading Sela's file, the summary of her life. He yawned.

Does my life bore you, crester?

"Sela Tyron, Commander. Eight campaigns. As many commendations for bravery. Six for valor. Field promotion over Deinde. Held that what? Over a year now?"

It was evident he did not expect her to reply as he continued to read from the handheld's screen.

"The other platoon commanders sing your praises. Incredibly, you have made not one entry for discipline or corrections for any of the one hundred and eight soldiers under you. Why's that?"

This time he was expecting an answer. She stared holes through the Great Seal in the wall over his head. Her hands balled into fists. But he did not notice. "Never had cause, sir."

Do you think me incompetent? Perhaps I let my soldiers run rampant, like the breeders we are?

Veradin was oblivious. "They say mixed companies are harder. But D Company, not a conscript to be found, all volunteers."

Sela had no idea who the Sceelah "they" were, but it was insightful. There had been an occasional conscript come through. They never lasted long. Sela had never bothered to figure out why. Interesting how he chose the polite word: *volunteers*, as if he were afraid he would offend. She had heard far worse from cresters.

But Veradin addressed her as if he were speaking to another crester. She suspected he was trying to confuse her and play at some sort of psy-analytic to trip her up.

Then Veradin frowned at something he read in her file.

"You declined advancement into Special Ops Elite. Any volunteer would jump at such an opportunity. Why?"

"I was needed here, sir," she answered stiffly. It was a half-truth.

Mere months after she had assumed temporary command of Deinde, she had received the trans from Origin. It was the first time in her life that she had ever received any sort of communication from outside of her battlegroup. The invitation to join SOE had been another surprise, but by then she knew her answer. Atilio had resurfaced in her life and she knew that she was not going anywhere.

She tore her gaze from the seal to look at Veradin. He gave her a lopsided smile. Sela guessed it was meant to be charming or affable. It really just made her want to punch him.

For the first time he demonstrated his uncanny ability to guess her thoughts. "Tyron, I'm not your enemy here. Can't you get to know me before you hate me?"

She did not answer, only watched him. He didn't need a response as he seemed to do the talking for both of them.

"I know what you think: here's some ignorant *crester*… that's what you call a Kindred like me, right?"

She watched him. Is that what someone told him? Use their words, their slang, and you'll fit in.

"So here I am, some ignorant crester. I took what you deserve. I took your command."

Bricky bastard, I'll give him that.

"But you don't deserve to command an infantry cache," he added, flopping the datfile onto the table. Her career quantified, neatly encompassed and apparently dismissed.

"Sir, I—"

"I think you deserve better," he said. "You deserve more. You're not some simple grunt, Tyron. Don't think like one."

Veradin pushed away from the desk. He rose, seemed to consider pulling his tunic back into more orderly lines, and gave up.

Sela frowned. Certainly, he was testing her or, worse, mocking her. This was entrapment.

"Sir?"

"Tyron, I am selfish. I need a second with your skills and your strengths. You know the soldiers under you. It makes little sense to start over with an entirely new second. I know why you made no discipline entries: loyalty. No one commands that. It's *earned*. You've already earned it from this company; I have a long way to go to get it."

Cresters don't talk to breeders like this. It just doesn't happen.

"So, Commander, I will make you a deal." He stepped around the desk. Sela was surprised to see that he stood nearly a half head taller than she. Cresters were *always* shorter.

"A deal… sir?" This *had* to be a test.

"I can learn from you, Tyron. I've never commanded volunteers." He paused, making a nebulous conjuring gesture at her, as if she were some mysterious entity instead of blood and bone. "And there are the… refinements of command I can

teach you. You need to know how to deal with conscripts and Kindred, if you're to succeed. Call it a trade."

Confused, Sela really looked at him for the first time. He was a recruitment vid for planetside conscripts: Brand new tunic, although misaligned, boots polished to a high shine. Tall, well-muscled. Perfect brown Eugenes hair and eyes. Veradin could have been purpose-bred like her. But looking deeper, she saw anxiousness in him bordering on fear. He had no clue what he was doing.

And she made him nervous.

This *could* be entertaining.

"Is this a test, sir?"

"No test." He smiled, this one broader, more genuine. "Give me half a year as my second. Then you can go wherever you want, if you wish. Reassignment, transfer. You name it. All with my commendation. You've my word. Agreed?"

Sela stared, stunned.

He started to fidget. "Your answer, Commander?" There was nothing in his voice to suggest he was mocking her.

"Yes, sir. Agreed."

Veradin stuck out his right hand. She looked at it, stupidly. When she did not move, he stepped forward and grasped her right hand in his own. She had no idea what *that* gesture meant, but had witnessed cresters greeting each other in a similar manner.

"Thank you, Ty. You don't mind if I call you that? Do you?"

Why would he be *thanking* her, she had no idea. She fully intended to make his life as difficult as possible over the next half-year.

"No, Captain," she replied. "That is your prerogative."

"Ty" was truncation of her patronymic, as perfunctory as that was. Breeder names are randomly selected and applied to newly born booters. The names were meant to honor fallen heroes. Sela had been named for Selanid Tyronis, liberator of *who-knows-what* of the year *too-dead-to-matter*. She had never cared about military history or famous ancient generals. They were dead, she reasoned. Couldn't have been *that* good at their jobs, then.

No one had called her "Ty" since her time in the kennels. Somehow Veradin had tuned into that. It was indicative of what this man did to her. Something about him threw her off balance. This man, who was as new as his command tunic, made her feel like a novice. But at the same time, he possessed this nameless *something* that was wise beyond his experience or years.

She was only able to sense this after her initial anger toward him cooled and her distrust quieted. There was something different about Jonvenlish Veradin. The rumors about him were abundant. Sela saw first-hand how he was treated as an outsider among the other cresters. The term "pauper lord" was thrown out at him a lot. Although Sela received the impression it was meant to be disparaging, she failed to grasp it. As a solider of the Regime, Sela had never possessed or needed currency. It was a vague concept that often seemed arbitrary (and more than a little ridiculous) to her.

But the stories she heard, though probably embellished greatly, indicated that the Veradin Kindred was the subject of some dishonoring in the recent past. Though her new captain had not been implicit, he suffered this reduced status nonetheless. The nature of this dishonor varied wildly depending upon who told the story. Fleet techs said it was because the patriarch of his Kindred had refused to offer conscripts to the Regime. Infantry said it was because the Veradin Kindred were against aiding the Fleet armada.

Whatever the cause, Veradin's behavior alone would have explained why he was considered an outsider. He did not act the same as other crester captains. He spoke *to* her, not *at* her.

And at times, he asked her the oddest, most pointless questions: *How are you today? Have you eaten yet? What do you do on downtime?* Bizarre. At first, Sela was wary to answer them, fearing some sort of ploy. But eventually she realized it just made Veradin… well, Veradin.

For all of his perceived faults, she started to see his merits. He could read situations with an innate ease that often provoked jealously in Sela. The man could talk his way into or out of just about any situation. He commanded with a firm, but fair hand. He was casual almost to a fault and she found it necessary to correct him on protocol and Decca almost daily. That was one way Veradin had taught her patience.

But never did he stop acting as though she were his equal.

The allotted time of their "deal" passed and neither of them pointed this out. Sela did not mind, did not even notice, in all honesty. Four years later and she could not envision her life without him.

Resting against the hard cold tiles of the stall, Sela realized she had to get Jonvenlish Veradin off the *Storm King* and as far away from the Council of First as possible.

Lineao, did your Fates know about this? Do they know what's in my heart before even I do?

6

Sela had assumed it to be a matter of her basic chemistry, but she was a creature of action. Stimulus. Response. And her response was to act. She felt it like a deep-seated itch in a healing wound. It was a surge of energy felt through every cell. In battle, where the threat was clear, this trait served her well. But when the threat was nebulous with no apparent means of attack, acting rashly was a disadvantage. Veradin had seen that in Sela within moments. He had attempted to teach her to control that rashness and look beyond the immediate.

Until she had met Veradin, her personal vision of the future had always been vague. She imagined survival from engagement to engagement, nothing more. But it was as if he could see a future for her beyond the now. She had committed the sin of believing him.

Yet in moments like this, it was so easy for her to fall back on old habits.

Count to ten. Breathe.

As she returned to the command hab level, Sela continued to count under her breath without realizing it. This time she stepped across the wide yellow line on the floor. Breeders were *never* allowed past this point. For a moment, she stood there in the subdued light of the corridor, facing what she assumed was the direction of Veradin's quarters.

Expecting what? A siren? SSD troopers to descend on her? Nothing happened.

She took it in. There were no crawlers here. No motion sensors. It seemed Trinculo and his ilk were less interested in monitoring the cresters. The walls were a muted brown unmarred by graffiti or scrapes from the crush of heavily armored bodies pushing past each other in a confined space. The ceiling felt higher.

Recessed lights shone down in a soft amber color. It was nearly palatial in comparison to the squadbays.

No guards were posted outside Veradin's chamber. Of course not. He was not there; he was in stockade. The lock on his door was easy to disarm. It opened with a thick metallic clunk. Without waiting to see if the noise brought anyone to investigate, Sela stepped inside.

The room's lights popped on, sensing her presence. Pulse roaring in her ears, she approached the simple single bed, impossibly neat. Impossible, if one knew Captain Veradin of the mussed hair and rumpled command tunic.

She found the space vaguely disappointing. There had been moments of weakness when she had imagined being here, in this room with him. What did he do in his hours away from her? Did he entertain visitors? Browse the holoweb? This might as well be a non-reg world.

There were things about Jonvenlish Veradin that were a complete mystery still. However to Sela, there were a million other details she found commonplace and endearing. He ran his hand through his hair, over the right temple when he was agitated. His laugh was honest and perhaps too loud. He chewed the pad of his thumb when distracted. But these were things a stranger would know after an hour.

What do I know of him, really? Why would First want him dead or call him traitor?

Above the bed's smooth surface, medals for valor lay in a simple row on the small shelf. An image capture glowed from the wall. She tabbed through the images on the device. Smiling faces of strangers looked out from a world Sela Tyron would never know. The last image slid a jealous barb into her heart.

Veradin, in the gray lapels of a cadet's jacket. He appeared years younger and a million worlds from that of the Regime, grinned happily under an alien sun. His arm was thrown around a refined-looking young woman with dark hair, striking green eyes and pensive smile. She was wrapped in a swathe of purple, the color of the Veradin Kindred. *Who was she?* Cresters had mates, even those from a smaller Kindred like the Veradin. *Does my captain have a wife?*

Sela sagged to the bed, dimpling the once-perfect surface. Then, after a brief hesitation, she flopped onto her side to push her face into the cushion. She inhaled his scent. Rolling onto her back, Sela gazed up at the flat expanse of ceiling. Doubt coiled in her gut.

The ship's chrono above the jamb ticked away precious time. Soon the level would be alive again with the changing shift. If she were to act, it had to be now.

Sela rose, plunking the gear bag open on the bunk. Blindly she shoved clothes, gear, and after a long thoughtful pause, the image capture into the bag. Moments later she was another set of shoulders weaving through the mass of bodies in the middle of the duty shift.

"What are you doing… sir?"

Valen. *He followed me.*

Sela stiffened.

But she could not look at him.

"You're on downtime, Valen. Go back to the squadbay." She kept her eyes on the closed door of the level risers, willing them to open, waiting for escape. *Why are they so damned slow?*

"I'm not leaving, boss. Not until you tell me what you're doing."

It was the defiance in his voice that made her turn to face him. Towering, reliable and oddly baby-faced Valen. There was a bitter pull to the bow of his mouth. His deep brown eyes held a muted anger. Was it for her?

"They're going to kill him," Sela said quietly.

Wordlessly, Valen took her elbow. No one noticed them in the crush of dutifully-bustling personnel. They were ignorant of, or uncaring about, this little drama as Valen tugged her into the nearest rec suite.

As soon as they crossed the threshold, Sela wrenched her arm from his grasp.

"Have you lost your mind, Sergeant?"

As she reached for the door control, he cycled it to lock. "Have *you*, boss?"

Sela exhaled a plosive sigh, allowing her shoulders to sag.

"I don't know. But I have to do *something*." With that she slumped to the rec bunk, not caring about what acts might have graced its surface in the past. She planted her face in her hands and propped her elbows on her knees.

There was a rustle of fabric in the dim ugly light as Valen moved closer. Then, after a very obvious hesitation, he sat beside her.

There was a long silence filled with the sound of the atmo scrubbers and some balefully sweet music the suite's previous users had inexplicably found enticing. Valen slapped a thick palm over the interface in the wall beside him. The music snapped off and the brightness of the room increased.

"I have to do something," she repeated.

"I heard they arrested him for going up against Silva—"

"No. Not for that. For treason."

"Treason? Why would they arrest the cap'n for treason?" Valen regarded her profile. But she continued to stare at the far wall.

"I don't know. But I do know the charges against him are false."

"Boss, how can you know…"

"I just *do*! Stop asking me questions." She stood abruptly. Valen watched her pace the small room.

Finally, he asked. "It's not just about Veradin, is it, Commander? Atilio meant something more to you."

Sela stopped mid-stride and turned to him. "You see so much, don't you?"

He shifted on the mattress. "All this and brains too." He smiled wistfully.

"Atilio was my son." It was strange to hear those words aloud. A secret given freedom in such an unlikely place.

His eyes widened. "Glory all."

"I've never told anyone. Not even Atilio. Not Veradin. In fact, you're the only person I've ever told."

"But, you should have reported…"

Tyron grimaced, shaking her head, as if to say: *does that matter anymore? Here and now?*

"They never meant for us to come back, did they?" Valen said after a pensive silence. "I got back to my rack and it'd already been reassigned to some booter."

Sela imagined the fearful expression on some newly minted soldier's face to see Valen towering over him like a resurrected giant from a fable.

"They meant for us to die there, Valen." Tyron sat back down beside him. "We were expendable."

"But Decca—"

"First doesn't play by those rules. They never have." She would not shelter him from the truth. That was not her way.

It was his turn to pace.

"I'm with you, Commander," he said quietly.

Sela looked up at him and offered a grim smile. Valen had always been there, it seemed. He was bedrock, firm footing. A constant in her life for how many years now?

"I've never doubted that, Sergeant. But this isn't your fight."

"You can't do this. You can't just tell me the lay of it and leave me out. What are you doing, Sela?"

She nodded. "I have to get the captain off the *Storm King*."

"You *have* lost your mind." Valen muttered, running a hand over his face.

"I need to get him on a craft, something they won't miss like a runner or—

"It's treason."

"I know. But I've never been surer of anything. The captain is innocent. Trinculo doesn't care about that. He wouldn't listen to me. He said he'd arrest me too if I didn't let it go."

Valen knelt before her. His enormous hands swallowed hers. "Okay, boss. Say you do that. You get Veradin off the *'King*. Then what? Trinculo finds out what you did. And then you're the one that's dead. Is that what you want? 'Cause I don't."

"If it comes to that." She looked down and gently pulled her hands from his. "Yes."

"No crester would do that for a breeder."

"He would. The captain would. He's the only reason the *Storm King* stayed in orbit, the only reason they extracted us."

"I know," he said. "But treason?"

"It's not treason. It's a rescue."

Valen rose. He extended a hand to her, palm up, inviting. "I know a flight tech that will help us."

"Us?" she asked. "No, Valen. I can't let you do this. Like you said, once Trinculo figures this out, he won't just stop with me."

She trusted Valen with her life. But she could not allow him to follow her down this suicidal path.

Yet, when she would not take his hand, he pulled her to her feet as if she weighted nothing.

"Some things you just don't have a say in."

7

The Cassandra class vessel Valen had found in the impound bay was one of the ugliest things to be brought into service by Fleet, in Sela's opinion. It was a relic by time she was a booter. But it was perfect.

Fleet did not make ships like this anymore and with good reason. It was a cesium fuel hog: a design flaw. It was the smallest vessel in Fleet to be fitted with velo drives, making it able to use flex points like a carrier.

Two enormous cesium tanks ran the length of the ship. And, like an afterthought, everything else was crammed in the spaces between: hab, galley, cargo hold. The command loft was situated in the center, where it was well-shielded from assault above and below. Sela had trained on models with similar internal layouts, but with less bulky hulls covered by active charge plating.

This Cassandra had seen better years. If she were one to dwell on such things, it could have been a sadness to see a mighty ship cast off like this. It had been relegated to a life of questionable service. As in the case of all obsolete vessels, once a ship was stripped of useful tech the Regime sold it to friendlies. This one had found its way into the ownership of a blockade runner. As a result, the Cassandra had non-reg engine mods and a list of problems as long as Sela's arm.

Although imperfect, the Cassandra was their only option. Taking a Fleet runner or even a stryker was impossible. Even if there were a way to gain access past encryption on flight controls, these ships were constantly under surveillance or being actively serviced by flight techs. And if, by some miracle, they had obtained one, flight was limited. Strykers and runners could not undergo conduit travel without a support vessel like a carrier.

With the *Storm King* still in the midst of velo spool-up, the personnel Sela and Valen passed in the corridors were mostly a mix of admins and Fleet techs. They were, in Sela's estimation, the big brains that made the conduit travel work. They were suitably distracted for now. None of them seemed to even notice the two helmeted SSD troopers or question their presence.

At the entrance to the stockade, Sela paused.

"It's not too late for you," she said in a low voice. The helmet's vox made her voice sound tinny and strained.

She could not tell Valen's expression beyond the darkened visor of his helm, but sensed he was grinning at her. "And what? Let you have all the fun, sir?"

"Valen—"

"Where in Nyxa's name have you been, troopers?"

Trinculo stood in the doorway with his arms folded and face ruddy with anger.

Her body snapped to attention. It was an ingrained reaction in the presence of any superior. Beside her, she sensed Valen do the same.

Her mind raced in competition with her heart hammering against her ribs. *He found out. He knows. Trinculo knows.*

"Officer Trinculo," Sela stammered, not entirely certain of her next words.

"You are twelve minutes late for duty, breeder!" Trinculo snapped, leaning into the faceplate of her helm. His spittle pelted her visor.

He cast his burning gaze up at Valen. "You as well! How are you to be trusted with a guard post when you cannot even report for duty on time?"

Guard post? Sela realized: Trinculo did not recognize them. He assumed they were the assigned security detail for stockade.

"It's my fault, Officer Trinculo," Valen spouted. "I… uh… made her wait while I finished up in the rec suite."

Eyes widening, Sela turned her head, just the slightest.

Trinculo took a step back. His face twisted in disgust. "Breeders and your disgusting rutting urges."

He shoved Sela aside as he moved past them. "Do your duty before you become permanent residents of the detention level. Both of you!"

Sela watched Trinculo disappear into the bustle of the corridor without a backward glance. *We are all the same to him.*

"Rec suite?" Sela turned to Valen.

He shrugged under the heavy armor of his stolen uniform. "He bought it, didn't he?"

As they approached Sela could see Veradin pacing in his cell, arms folded across his unfastened tunic, chewing at the pad of his thumb. A million mile stare cast out into the passage. At the sight of him like this, so altered, Sela felt something tighten in her chest. She feared her voice would fail her. That was when Valen spoke.

"Captain Veradin. Come with us, sir."

The captain's gaze shifted and he seemed to resurface from some internal mire: "Is it time already?"

"Yes, sir."

"Trinculo said I could see Commander Tyron before I leave."

At that moment, she knew Veradin would never come willingly if he recognized them. He would fight off their attempt to rescue him, insist on protecting his sullied crester honor.

Valen stepped in front of her before she could move or act.

"It's been arranged, sir." He opened the cell door, gesturing to the passage.

Veradin came obediently, his head down as he offered his wrists for the restraints. Sela willed her hands to be steady as she snapped the metal cuffs on him. Oddly silent, he studied the grating of the deck and allowed himself to be led, seldom looking up. The expression on his face was unreadable. He looked as if he were sleepwalking.

Sela resisted the urge to tell him that this was a plan and that all would end well. But she knew, it would do little good to bring attention to themselves. Trinculo had eyes and ears everywhere.

By the time they reached the cavernous echo of the hangar and were surrounded by the darkened bulks of inactive skiffs and runners, Sela was starting to believe this might actually work. Perhaps, there was even a possibility Veradin would go along with an escape.

Valen led the way; she took up the rear, and they reached the ship without being stopped.

But as they boarded the open ramp of the Cassandra, Veradin seemed to snap out of it. In the dim light of the cargo hold, he raised his head and took in his surroundings.

Valen granted her a quick nod and walked down the ramp. He would stand watch outside the hangar until the captain was away.

And then… and then…

Sela ignored that nagging thought.

"A Cassandra?" Veradin asked, frowning. "Bit of a relic—"

Sela pulled her helm off and let it clatter to the floor.

Veradin blinked. "Ty?"

"We don't have much time, sir."

"Ty?" he repeated, anchored to the spot.

"Here." She shoved the duty kit at him. He clutched it in self-defense, the action made awkward by the restraints. "Civilian attire. A few provisions. One sidearm. Best I could manage."

"What's going on?" Veradin looked down at the kit and then up to Sela.

"I broke into your quarters," she confessed.

"You did *what*?" He stared at her. "Have you lost your damned mind?

Everyone keeps asking me that. Perhaps I have.

"They're not transporting you offship to stand trial. First issued a death warrant for you, Captain."

"Death warrant? Don't be ridiculous!" He studied her. "How did you…?"

She bit her lip. "Trinculo, sir."

She reached for his restraints to unfasten them.

He stepped back. "You went to the *Information* Officer! Ty…."

"Whatever the charges, you are innocent."

"Exactly!" he said, leveling a finger at her. "If I run, it will only give the wrong message—"

"Yes, I know you believe that, sir! But if you've ever trusted me, you'll listen to me now! First doesn't care if you are innocent or not. Trinculo said you're going to die, either way. There will be no trial. Just an execution."

Veradin gaped at her. "That doesn't make sense. There has to be some kind of mistake"

Forcefully, she grabbed at his cuffs and unlocked them. "Agreed, sir. That's why you can't stay here."

"But what about you?"

He snatched at her sleeve, but she dodged him and sprinted up the few steps that led from the Cassandra's cargo bay to the common passage. Veradin caught up and followed her up the short ladder to the command loft. She slid down into the recessed grav couch that served the pilot and navigator consoles. He collapsed onto the seat beside her, still clutching the duty kit to his chest.

"You're coming with me then, right?" he asked. "Right?"

She ignored him, attention riveted to her task. Her entry codes worked on the first try. The tight knot in her stomach loosened slightly.

Around them the ship began to revive begrudgingly. Internal lights sputtered on to illuminate rusted, chipping paint and suspicious fluid leaks. A faint moan from the Cassandra made her cringe as the cesium tanks primed. The velos gave a disconcerting high-pitched squeal before settling down into a low continuous thrum.

New reads appeared on the com-sys screens and she released a relieved breath. Finally, the carrier's intraship system opened. There, the *Storm King*'s sensory horizon was represented in bits of numerical string. Sela had memorized the order sets needed and began to systematically deactivate the dextir array. The result would temporarily blind the *Storm King* on that side, according to the instructions relayed by Valen's tech contact.

Sela did not know what debt Valen held over the head of his Fleet tech, but it must have been incredible leverage. Maybe it was a rec mate that was sweet on him. Whatever the case, she could have kissed him or her.

If Trinculo lets me live that long.

She rose, stuffing the portable interface unit into the pocket of the stolen SSD trooper utilities. Hurriedly, she clambered across the top of the sunken bench of the command loft. She did not bother with the rungs of the ladder that led back to the common way and leapt down.

"Answer me: what about you?" Veradin was steps behind her. At least he'd left the kit in the loft.

Don't look at him. Stick to the plan.

She rummaged the handheld out of her pocket and held it out to him. When he would not move to take it, she pressed it to his chest.

"The ship's had a lot of non-reg mods done to it. It's not the most efficient, but it's fast. A failure in the *Storm King*'s external array on the dextir side will appear. If you leave the *'King* just prior to jump, they won't see you slip into the FP first."

He snatched the handheld angrily and gave it only a cursory glance. A timer on its face offered a staccato soundtrack. The Cassandra was vastly smaller than the *Storm King*; the velo spool-up would take mere minutes in comparison.

Sela pressed on. "Even if they do, there won't be time for them to stop spool-up. The nav-comp has already been prelogged to fit along the failure. Con-sys has already been programmed. All you have to do is go."

"*Go?* Go where?"

"Not much time, sir. Your departure must be precise."

"Just… just stop for a second."

"You'll need to avoid sensor drones. And whatever you do, don't try to return to or contact anyone in Origin. They'll anticipate that—"

"We can't do this."

She scooped up the stolen trooper helm and turned toward the ramp. The plan was to meet up with Valen in the corridor beyond the hangar.

He clutched her arm as she started to don the helm. "What are *you* going to do?"

"This is the plan, sir, to get you to safety. I'll be fine." She had never lied to him before.

"Trinculo will find out. It's what he does."

"I'm looking forward to it, sir."

In truth, she was. Nothing would feel better than to take that smug sneer off that bastard's face. Admittedly, she would probably never get close enough to him to do it, but a girl could hope.

She did not want to face him. But, finally, she did. Always when she was alone with him, there was a knot of words in the back of her head. Always something that was never voiced, always on the horizon, something she had been meaning to get to, something she needed worlds of time to chase or explore. But now there was no more time.

"Captain Veradin, sir, it has been an honor." Her throat felt too tight as she squeezed out the words. She extended her right hand to him.

"No." He shook his head. "It doesn't end like this. It can't."

He took her offered hand, but held it. His grip almost painful.

"Ty." He pulled her to him.

"You have to go. Quickly. Please," Sela begged. Here was another first in such a short space of time. First lying. Now begging. "Go now. You're never going to have a chance to prove you're innocent if you stay, sir."

"I can't let you do this. There has to be another way. Come with me." He kept his grip on her hand and took a stride back toward the command loft.

"Captain, you don't understand." She dug her heels into the deck. "This is my place. This is the only life I have ever known. This is where I *belong*."

Why did he not just go? Why was he being so stubborn?

"You know I don't believe that." His grip tightened. There was something crushing about his voice. It sounded like fear, not for himself, but for her. "I will not have you suffer because of me."

"No." She met his gaze, unafraid. "No, sir. I suffer either way."

I suffer... There. The words came from the aching hollowness that dwelled within her ever since Tasemar. "I will not lose you and my son on the same day. I will not fail you both."

".Atilio." He inhaled sharply with the revelation. Then slowly, his hand moved up to touch her face. "Sela. Forgive me. I didn't—"

There was a sudden wicked flash at the deck near her foot.

"Contact!" She shoved him up the Cassandra's open ramp.

Dark helms and bustling armor moved near the hangar entrance. SSD troopers. At least six of them. They were found out. The real stockade detail must have finally shown up.

"Valen!" She tapped her vox. "Status."

"Boss... get out of—" A hiss of static poured out of her earpiece.

Slow. Everything was so slow. Grabbing her weapon took an eternity. Squaring off, she placed her body between Veradin and the hostiles.

She fired three rounds, trying to gauge her targets against the darkened hulls of the resting ships. Something powerful struck her chest. She staggered back, but did not fall.

"Ty!"

Sela doubled over, swallowing a painful bellow. Her chest seized, squeezing the air from her lungs. She took another shambling step and collapsed onto the ramp, smelling burning skin and charred fabric.

The world dissolved beneath a bleak and swift tide. It stole her sight and sealed her ears. Sela drew in a signal painful breath and knew no more.

There was no air, only darkness and the molten fire carving through her chest.

But here, pain would not obey training. In the dark, it was her constant companion. It was nothing to be mimicked by broken bones or even the birth of her son.

Atilio. An agonizing emptiness came with that name. Memory surged back.

Atilio was dead.

Sela sat up, inhaling sharply as she surfaced from the black. Her pulse pounded behind her eyes. Her throat was a string of fire. She took in another greedy breath and immediately grunted at the fresh pain that spread out from her chest and shoulder.

She rolled to her side and threw up, gazed blankly at the resulting mess on the floor, and rested her forehead against something blessedly cool and hard.

Moving, she decided, was a long term goal. Focusing on breathing was better. In fact, this was how she should spend the rest of her life. She blearily took in the dim room: Bunk. No windows. The faint smell of ozone, now mixed with vomit. Everything vibrated at a peculiar pitch.

Something wrong with the 'King's drives.

Disjointedly she wished that the bloody techs would fix it. The vibration made her head split. But memory swelled around her. This was not the *Storm King.*

Veradin! She sat up sharply. Big mistake.

"Easy. Try not to move." Her captain stooped over her.

Where'd he come from?

His hands were warm against her skin. She allowed him to push her back into the bunk. The pain did not let her resist.

"Captain?"

The lights in the tiny room were dimmed, but she knew it was the bunk room on the Cassandra.

"It's alright, Ty." His voice was strained, hoarse. His tunic hung open, exposing dried blood on his shirt.

Was he injured too?

He saw her notice it and fastened his tunic closed.

She grabbed his hand. "Tell me, sir."

"What do you remember?"

"The hangar…" She looked away sharply as it surfaced with hideous clarity.

I suffer either way.

"Trinculo's men opened fire," he said. "You were hit. Fates… you weren't breathing. You were dead."

She could only stare. "Dead."

Wearily, he sat on the bunk across from her, hands planted on his knees.

"There was no other way out. We were pinned there. I had to move quickly before the security detail advanced. Trinculo's men wouldn't listen to me," he explained. "I pulled you up the ramp, into the Cass. Got us underway. There was a vivject kit in the medikit. I didn't know how old the stuff was, but I used it on you. I was afraid it wouldn't work, but I got you back. "

"And Valen?" she asked eagerly.

Realization flitted over Veradin's face. "He was the other trooper, wasn't he? The one that released me from stockade."

She nodded. "His vox cut off."

"It happened so fast. I don't know." Jon shook his head grimly.

Sela sank into cushions, her gaze downcast, hoping Valen had survived. Although if he were alive, he most certainly would be in custody, facing Trinculo's wrath. She had meant to remain on the *Storm King* and face the consequences with him, satisfied that she had given the captain a chance at being free.

That should be me, not my sergeant.

A renewed bolt of pain shot through her shoulder. Gingerly, she traced the awkward bandage over the left side of her chest and shoulder. Had it not been for the SSD armor, there would have been a not so tidy hole burned through her chest.

A second bandage covered her bicep on that side. She frowned.

"Your tracer-ident. I had to take it out," he explained.

Groggy, she blinked up at him. "That's been there my whole life."

In response, he drew up his sleeve to reveal a hastily-wrapped bandage on his right forearm. "Dug mine out too. At least you got to be unconscious for yours."

"Is there any sign of pursuit?"

He shook his head. "We got free just as the *'King* hit the jump. It'll take them half a day at least to spool back up and come about, if they do it at all."

Would they?

She rolled cautiously onto her side and maneuvered to a seated position on the bunk's edge. They were deserters now, a status likely to earn them arrest warrants from the Regime. It made little sense to redirect an entire carrier like the *Storm King* for simple fugitive reclamation. But one thing was certain, someone would be coming for them sooner or later.

She looked up at her captain. "Sir, we have to prepare."

The Cassandra was powered down: cold mode. Faint starlight entered through the small oblong portal set into the wall. Sela huddled against her captain on the narrow bench of what served as a common room and galley. Their embrace was born from the desire for warmth more than intimacy, although in another time and place she would not have found it disagreeable.

It seemed a small eternity that Sela kept her arms wrapped about his neck. On and off, she dozed against him. The pain in her injured shoulder woke her with merciless regularity once the pharms wore off. When she stirred, Veradin seemed to sense her discomfort. His warm hand pressed against her waist.

"Pain?" His voice was a tight whisper. Steam marked his breath in the frigid air.

"No. I'm good," she lied. This trait was coming too easily. Especially in the dimness, when she needn't meet his gaze. "Is it gone?"

There was a draft of cold air as he shifted. The light of the handheld interface briefly illuminated his features, blue light on cheekbones, eyes intense. He gave a satisfied nod at what he saw there.

"The sensor drone is gone." He tilted the screen for her to see. "It's drifted past. Safe range to heat up the engines. That should be the last for this grid."

Veradin straightened. She missed his weight and warmth. He positioned the blanket over Sela's shoulders and she rolled her eyes at his mothering.

Another shifting sound of fabric in the dark. The overheads popped on. Both of them squinted under the sudden glow. Veradin made more adjustments to the

interface. A rushing hiss announced the scrubbers kicking on. The welcome sensation of warmed air swirled around her arms and feet.

"I'm frozen solid," he muttered, stamping his feet and rubbing his hands together.

Frozen. A word she understood. Her limbs were made of ice, her fingers tingled with needle pricks even under the gloves. Moves slow and careful, she shifted position on the hard metal bench and squeezed her eyes shut. The dull throb in her shoulder threatened to wrap around her chest.

She swatted away Veradin's steadying hand. If she had to look at his guilty expression once more, she would shoot him just to see some variety.

Beneath the nearly manageable riot of pain and ice, a great sinking stillness washed over her. She may as well as been adrift in the same void that encompassed the rusted little vessel they called shelter. She was as devoid of course or purpose now.

Where was Lineao and his talk of Paths now? Perhaps he would have laughed at her.

"I *need* access to get a trans out," Veradin announced. His voice, so long held at a tight whisper to avoid the detection of the sensor drone, seemed overly loud against the metal walls. "I have to find someone… anyone in Origin that will listen to me. First has to know that they made a mistake."

She looked at him. It was not just the words he had used but the uncommon pitch to his voice.

Haven't you heard? First doesn't make mistakes.

"We must stay away from Origin at all costs," she said, flatly.

"Or even a way to get a downlink to the Regime datafeeds."

"To do what, sir? It is strategically unsound."

The words *strategically unsound* were often his invitation to argue. His shoulders went square and stubborn.

"I need know what's going on, why this is happening," he said, kneeling before her. The desperation seemed to radiate from him and enliven the soreness in her chest, increasing it. "I need to find someone. If this is happening to me, then she could be in jeopardy as well. There has to be a way to find her."

She? That now too familiar icy barb reappeared as she thought of the image capture in his quarters. Her captain with his arm thrown around a dark haired beauty.

"The moment the IDS matches our ident, they will destroy us," she argued.

Automated weaponized beacons that guarded the outskirts of Origin's more developed regions were capable of destroying a non-reg vessel like the Cass. Especially one that lacked appropriate clearance. Approach of Origin was tantamount to suicide. But there might be a means to gain the information he wanted. Possibly…

He studied her face. "You have an idea, don't you?"

"We have to capture a Fleet coms array."

Veradin smiled broadly. There was no joy in it, only recklessness. She immediately regretted sharing the idea.

"Ty, I could kiss you."

"One assault per day is enough for me. Thank you, sir." Sela turned away, feeling her ears grow hot.

The gutted remains of the coms array lay scattered across one corner of the deceptively large cargo hangar of the Cass. Sela scowled at the rolling lines of data on the portable interface, but it made no difference. This was her fourth time through the snarled mess.

"It's just like I said. There's nothing more here." She sighed. An intense headache thudded behind her eyes.

"That's good, right?" Veradin had stopped pacing. Now he sat on the last step into the cargo bay, his interlaced fingers cradling his head.

"I'm not sure how, sir."

The trans to the account of Information Officer Trinculo had been stark, simple. It called for the arrest of Jonvelish Onid Veradin. No charges or accusing parties listed. Although the trans bore the emblem of the Council of First, it seemed… off.

The branding of a Kindred as a traitor would be prime gossip disguised as news for consumption by Citizens in the Known Worlds beyond Origin. Yet there were no other feeds that mentioned the Veradin Kindred. Nothing in the fugitive codex or the First-controlled media feeds. It was a single bloody missive meant to be quiet, unrecognized. And seemingly designed to not cause a ripple.

"Suspicious does not begin to cover that," Veradin muttered.

"Is it possible that Trinculo was implicit?" Sela offered. "Perhaps Captain Silva had this arranged?"

Veradin dismissed it with a shake of his head. "Such an action is rather dramatic, even by Kindred standards. Silva is a prideful fool but knows our rules. It's too risky. And there's no style to it. No trial means no audience."

"When they came to get you in the hangar bay, it was a show for everyone," Sela said. "But when Trinculo arrested you, even the surveillance crawlers had disappeared. They didn't want a record."

She had heard tales of the back-biting and political wrangling that took place among the cresters for influence within the Council of First. But to seek to have a perceived political threat killed was the equivalent of declaring war on another Kindred and its allies. As a soldier, that part was easy for her to understand.

"Something tells me Trinculo was not behind this. I've known Information Officers like him before. He is a self-righteous functionary, a blind follower of orders—which he's made abundantly clear today. He lacks the imagination required to become corrupt," Veradin added. "There's something missing here."

A new idea struck her. Who else was curious about Jonvenlish Veradin and might access his file? When she searched the index that monitored file access, she sat bolt upright at the results on the screen: the Ravstar seal. It represented a secretive division within the Regime, largely associated with weapons tech and development. They were black ghosts operating well off radar. And they were not something you wanted to know too much about.

"Sir…" she hesitated. "Why would anyone with Ravstar attempt to access your personnel files?"

"Ravstar." He breathed the word, eyes widening. "Erelah. But why?"

"Sir?"

"Erelah Veradin." He regarded Sela with a red-rimmed stare. "Find her, Ty. Please. She's a civilian consultant appointed to Fleet. I need her location."

Inwardly, Sela sighed. She did not want to know about this mystery woman.

I am nothing if not duty bound.

Again, she searched the interface. Each time she spliced the interface frame from the array was another chance at their detection. If the wrong person was looking at the right time, the Cassandra's location would be known.

The response to this search was too quick.

"There's nothing here, sir. Just a civilian birth record."

He frowned, quickly striding toward her. "Nothing?"

"There's no location listed, Captain."

"I don't understand."

Veradin peered over her shoulder at the tiny screen. With an exasperated grunt, he snatched the handheld from her. He thumbed through the screens, muttering. "She has to be *somewhere*."

Sela peered up at him, waiting for answers.

A new and strange uneasiness rattled her raw nerves. There were barely visible shapes moving in very murky waters here. That same internal *something*, a quiet voice that dwelled at the back of her skull and had served her as long as she could remember, now screamed warnings.

This is wrong. Search no further.

"So much doesn't make sense." Veradin lowered the handheld. His distant gaze rested on the rusting wall of the hold. "We have to find… someone. There have to be loyal Kindred somewhere. Divus. Novian. Someone."

Sela knew where this was going.

"Attempting to contact anyone is strategically unsound," she warned. "Enforcement agents would expect that. We're not going to be dealing with inexperienced SSD troopers anymore. It'll be EEs… enforcement elite, sir."

But Veradin was back to stubborn, gone-square mode.

"Cap'n, why would Ravstar seal your records?" When he did not answer, she tugged at his arm. "Who is Erelah? Your mate?"

His gaze cleared. It was as if he remembered she was there.

"Mate?" He scoffed. "No. She's my sister."

Relief melted the ice. *Sister.*

She nodded, but did not truly understand. Sela was sure she had half-siblings, dozens perhaps, all sharing the same birth mother, a duty-bound breeder in a kennel along the fringes of Origin. It was a violation of Decca to know them. They had lived and perhaps died, ignorant of those with whom they shared a blood line. The concept of any sort of attachment to them ended there. The men and women of her company were more like brothers and sisters than any of those strangers. That had been the intention.

My strength is the soldier beside me. My heart and mind, I give to the Regime with honor; I forsake all else.

"Erelah was always determined to do what she wanted." His expression saddened. "Smart. Too smart for Uncle to send her off to study in a temple somewhere. She joined Fleet after his death. I wasn't too happy with her for doing that. It's been a while since I last talked to her. We didn't leave things on the best of terms."

Sela shifted, unsure. This was alien territory, and forbidden. It had never occurred to her with any great detail that cresters had personal lives and histories filled with complicated entanglements. She was uncertain what she was meant to say or do.

"I don't know why someone would just… hide her," Veradin said, slowly circling the dismantled drone, studying the scarred deck plates. "How do I find her? What if she is in danger as well?"

The fact that his sister's location was unknown suggested that danger had already found her. But Sela kept this observation to herself. He was already prepared to take reckless action to make simple contact. It would not serve to motivate him further.

"I still need answers. I'm going to get them. I know approaching Origin is dangerous. But there has to be a way in." His eyes were fixed on a distant place when he spoke. "You don't have to come with me. You're caught up in something here that should have never involved you. We'll find some place safe for you —"

"What! No, sir." Sela stood up. The sudden movement drove a wedge of pain into her chest.

But he kept talking. "This is all my fault… somehow. It's not your fight."

"That won't matter, sir," she said.

She snatched the handheld back and thumbed through the screens to show him what she already knew.

There, listed like a footnote for daily ship's business for the *Storm King*, was the death warrant for Commander Sela Tyron, for desertion of duty, signed by Information Officer Trinculo. Sela thrust the screen back at him.

"I'm as good as dead again anyway."

PART 2

The Humans. They arrived as refugees, claiming that their home, Earth, lay among the stars well beyond ours. They journeyed an impossible distance, made short by their surprisingly clever ability to make use of a natural tear in the fabric between worlds: wormholes, they called them.

Had they met us first, the Eugenes, the tale of their arrival would have been different. Perhaps we would have even helped them. But the Fates placed them in the path of the Sceeloid, our sworn enemy.

Of course, there were those Eugenes who welcomed the Humans as the Palari, the lost children. It was a story passed down through the hundred ages even before the Council of First sat in judgment of all. Every Eugenes child, noble or base born, knew it well.

The Fates, mystical sisters that governed the lives of all living things: Natus, the mother; Metauri, the task maker, and Nyxa, the cruel. There had once been a fourth sister, Miri, the youngest and granter of mercies. She was the one charged with determining the Paths of Eugenes souls, but the task grew heavy on her heart. Miri sought to rebel against her sisters and created the Palari, brothers and sisters of the Eugenes that had free lives with no set Paths. She hid her children away and sent them into the far darkness of the wild stars, the place we now call the Reaches, to fend for themselves. There they dwelled, well beyond the roving, wizened eyes of her older sisters.

One day the fierce dragon, Sceelo, came to the Fates, demanding the gift of Sight that the Fates possessed. He wished to see into the hearts of all Eugenes, his enemy, and to better know their weaknesses.

The Fates laughed at Sceelo's boldness, sending him away. But Miri followed him in secret. Worried for her lost children, she struck a deal with him: She would grant him the Sight, and in exchange, Sceelo would protect the Palari. The cunning dragon agreed, but the moment his Sight was granted, he killed Miri and consumed her body. The children of his body came to possess the Sight as well.

When the remaining Fates learned of Miri's murder, they were powerless to destroy Sceelo, for he could see into their hearts and minds and outsmart their schemes in battle. For many years, Sceelo terrorized the Eugenes, slaughtering them easily by using his stolen gift. Although the Fates could not take back Miri's gift, they could change the Eugenes. If a Fate touched a newborn Eugenes within three nights of his birth, his heart and mind would be protected against the prying eyes of Sceelo's wicked Sight.

After many years, the Eugenes grew stronger, vanquishing Sceelo and his soldiers. He was forced back to his lair at the entrance to the Reaches, where he ruled all. The children of the Fates were safe from Sceelo, except for the forgotten Palari, who would forever be vulnerable to Sceelo's Sight.

When the Humans came in their great battered vessels full of many families, you would not know one from a Eugenes. The differences were minor and easily missed by the untrained eye. Of course, their speech was indecipherable. Their tech was miserably primitive. To many it was an embarrassment to embrace these frail backward beings as kin. This small, pitiful group fell upon Eugene's shores seeking refuge from the Sceeloid, who had tried to consume them like the great fabled dragon from long ago. The Sceeloid had enslaved many of them, burning into their minds with the Sight.

The Humans that had escaped this danger brought the disease of weakness with them. And, in the end, some believe we had little choice but to do what came next: extermination.

"Observations on a Ruined World"

Helio Veradin, Seventh Councilman of Argos

Excerpt from his speech to the 498th Assembly of the Council of the First Children of the Fates in protest against the Purge of Humans from Eugenes space.

9

TWO YEARS EARLIER...

"Beautiful."

Erelah Veradin did not realize she had said the word aloud, watching the twisting azure swirl of the nascent flex point's visible light distortion wave on the monitor. The phenomenon, a very safe fifty thousand meters away from the station, was easily explainable as a matter of excited electrons colliding around the fold-center—a rather dry way to describe something so lovely.

"Couldn't agree more," Senior Tech Adan Titus muttered under his breath.

Erelah glanced at him, realizing he was staring, again, at her. She briefly met his gaze. He grinned. The blood rushed to her face and neck. Adan never missed an opportunity to flirt.

Old Sissa would have frowned in disapproval. A proper lady would have discouraged Adan's overtures from the start. After all, Erelah was to join the Order of Miri to become a priestess one day. What would Uncle say...?

Neither one of them were here anymore. *Were they?*

Quickly Erelah looked back at the monitor, dismissing. As she blinked, the light evaporated, replaced by the silver-skinned stryker prototype her team had dubbed the *Jocosta*.

She released a relieved sigh, shared by the other members of the team. Then all remained silent, anxious for the sensor report.

"Systems nominal. Shielding at full. Internal sensors indicate increase in temp," Myrna called, reading breathlessly from the transmission of the unmanned craft. "Hull's intact. Impulse, atmo, are all good."

Someone whooped joyfully. It was probably one of the other civilian consultants. Like Erelah, they tended to be a little more obvious in emotional displays. She joined the collective chuckle. There was good reason to celebrate. They had succeeded where prior NeuTech teams had failed: the first vessel to make a jump without a flexpoint in history of Fleet or anywhere, to her knowledge. The test results were far from final, but this was an incredible breakthrough.

This could change travel among the Known Worlds forever. Transport between regions would no longer be governed on control of mapped flex points and the territories surrounding them. A vessel—more accurately, a vessel equipped with a j-drive device like the one on the *Jocosta*—could create an artificial access and egress point. And to demonstrate this ability with something as small as a single-manned stryker compounded the success. Until now, the smallest vessels with conduit travel capability were the outmoded Cassandra models. But those still relied upon mapped flex points.

Erelah tried to stem her excitement. There was still a great deal of data to review, but there was a glimmering certainty to today's success she could not deny at her core. This was it!

It was not her team's efforts alone that had allowed them to reach this point, only continued research that they had been chosen to undertake. Each success and failure had been built upon the last. The *Jocosta* project was decades old. She had dug up early records, basic notes really, that dated back to the time of the Purge. None of the prior NeuTech teams had gotten this far… until now.

If only Uncle could have lived to see this. What would he have said? Would he have been proud?

That thought muddied her excitement. Her uncle had been a pacifist, and stern in his criticism of the Regime. Even now she could visualize his disapproving frown. And she was not foolish. She knew the backers behind the NeuTech installation were far from peaceful in their dealings. That was not how the Regime enforced the will for the Council of First. It would be childish to assume otherwise.

Certainly her brother, then would share her joy, were she not bound to secrecy. The level of security at the installation raised paranoia to an art form. It

was nearly half a year after her arrival before she had been permitted to send a carefully worded and highly edited trans to Jonvenlish.

"Excellent work, Lady Veradin." Adan placed a hand on her shoulder, squeezed once. "Congratulations!"

Erelah smiled, allowed herself to be pulled back to the present. The moment Adan had learned of her hereditary title, he wasted little time in using it to embarrass her. She had begged him not to call her that around the *Jocosta* team. But he meant it now as a form of good-natured teasing. No one else had seemed to notice.

The title had been bestowed upon Erelah with Uncle's death. Helio Veradin had disowned the only other surviving member of her Kindred, her brother, Jonvenlish. It was a little family drama that had no use on a research installation, except as distracting gossip. Having a title of lord or lady here only set the owner apart. It was not very useful when trying to promote a smooth work environment, especially when surrounded by conscripts and techs.

Erelah's teammates pressed closer, all talking at once. It was a victory for them.

She held up her hands, beseeching their attention, having to raise her voice to be heard over them.

"I know this is exciting. But we can't get ahead of ourselves here," Erelah cautioned.

Adan groaned. "Spoil it, why don't you?"

This encouraged a few chuckles.

She grinned. "You know as well as I do, Mr. Titus, that we have much data to analyze before we call today an absolute success."

There was still the very significant issue of the subspace instability for creating an artificial flex point near active velo drives, the design still employed by the vast majority of Fleet's carriers.

As the small group broke up, returning to their consoles, the excited murmur continued. Adan remained at her elbow.

"There seems to be the small matter of a wager that needs collecting," he said, leaning closer still.

It was a risk on his part, his open fraternizing in front of his crew. He was like no other Erelah had met before. Adan was refreshing, alive with an irreverence that, at times, flirted with dangerousness. He was a very rare commodity in this environment.

"No clue what you're talking about," Erelah sighed dramatically, switching to High Eugenes, playing into his performance.

She affected a haughty lift to her chin. It was a game they sometimes enjoyed. Erelah as the Kindred lady and he the ardent courtier. Like something from the old holo-vids of courtly life during the times of the great Expanse. They continued this performance in unspoken agreement, each attempting to outdo each other.

"I believe, my lady, I owe you dinner," Adan answered in the same stilted language. He stooped into a low bow. Before she could pull away, he kissed the back of her hand.

Erelah laughed, pulling her hand free of his before any of the others noticed. Not that it would matter. Even if they were not preoccupied with today's success, they had long turned a blind eye to the game Adan and she played.

Not long ago Adan had made her a wager that the *Joosta* would not be successful with new alignment to the resonators. Something he knew was improbable. He chose the losing end of a bet on purpose. And now he expected Erelah to collect on it.

"All right." She sighed, feigning resignation. "If I must, Titus. But on one condition."

"Name it."

"Stop calling me 'Lady'."

Adan burst out laughing. "Agreed, your worship."

"How does a Last Daughter find her way all the way to NeuTech, of all places?"

Adan grinned at her across the empty plates and half full glasses of very dull wine. Twice he had poured a clear amber liquid into his glass from a flask he secreted from an inside of a pocket of his neat black tunic. Each time, Erelah turned down the proffered anonymous drink, so he drank it himself. As a consequence Adan's grin broadened more and more on his flushed face. One of them should be able to walk a straight line after dinner, she reasoned.

"How indeed, Adan," Erelah replied. "I was too old for Fleet school, so I petitioned to be a civilian consultant instead."

"A surprising choice," he observed. "I would have thought certainly a political course would have suited one of your pedigree."

"Not much of a choice, really. I am the Last Daughter of a Kindred with nothing left to offer but a name, a marred one at that. As you might imagine, it would limit one's options."

"A pity. But our gain, then…"

"Mine as well. Or so I tell myself." She flashed a thin smile. "When I was little I wanted to study conduit travel at one of the Fleet training facilities in Origin. Of course, my uncle would not allow it."

"Helio Veradin," he nodded. "He was quite the figure… or so I've read."

Erelah sat taller in her chair, puffing out her chest in an imitation of her uncle. She pulled her mouth into a frown and furrowed her brows. Her voice deepened with a rolling High Eugenes accent.

"'Erelah, a young woman of your position does not have the luxury of choice. You are a gift of Miri. One that should not be wasted on their machines of war and subjugation.'"

"He called you that: a gift of Miri?" Adan chuckled.

Erelah ducked her head, feeling her face grow hot. Perhaps the weak wine had been too much for her. She was unused to it.

"Uncle wanted me to be a Temple priestess, join the Order of Miri. And he always got his way, but he did permit me to study my other interests in private."

"A priestess?" Adan raised an eyebrow.

She nodded.

What other choice did she have in the end, when Uncle passed? This, or the cloister school at Acryia and being joined to the Order of Miri. Jonvenlish was an officer of the Regime; he was off in the fringes of the Known Worlds, commanding troops and living on a carrier. He had no means to support or shelter her. Even the Kindred who had once called her family an ally had seemed to evaporate the moment Helio Veradin died.

Even before she and Jonvenlish became his wards, Helio's outspoken political views were considered unpopular and controversial. He routinely decried the exploitation of breeders for combat use and dangerous labor, and rallied for their equal treatment. Ultimately, he and other like-minded Kindred were sanctioned by the Council of First, stripped of territories and titles that were not protected by inheritance laws.

Intended for a life in the temples, Erelah had been left very little as inheritance. There was nothing to present her as a lucrative match for a mate, even if there had been another Kindred willing to wed her, a peasant member of the elite, to one of their offspring. Erelah was, then, the Last Daughter of Veradin. When she

was younger and taken by the romantic, it was a title she thought of as sad and poetic, like a lost cause. Only now, she realized how apt that notion was.

With Helio Veradin's death, Erelah had become a ward of the Council of First which readily reclaimed the estates on Argos, her home for as long as she could remember. And now, she existed at the whim of First.

Although she did not possess the might and prowess of her brother, she did hold some value. Her intellect was recognized immediately at the intake center. And, after a laughably short period of training, Fleet had slapped an honorary consultancy title on her and trundled her off to tech division. Within two years, she had been shipped again, like cargo—important cargo, but a possession nonetheless—to NeuTech.

"Perhaps you can offer a benediction for the next test flight," Adan offered.

Erelah rolled her eyes.

"I notice that you have not had your eye color corrected. Daring choice."

She stiffened slightly.

"I've embarrassed you. Apologies."

"It's nothing."

In her childhood the light green hue of her eyes was the subject of despair, as she suffered the taunts of the few other Kindred children she encountered. Erelah and Jonvenlish were born of favored servants that had died when the hard fevers struck Argos. Although they were raised in a life of modest privilege, to Erelah her green eyes were a reminder that she did not fit in. Sometimes she would pray to Miri for her eyes to be the rich, deep brown that was considered "correct" among the high born Eugenes. Her brother had been lucky in that regard. It meant you came from good stock. A pure bloodline. It meant you belonged.

"Certainly your family would have had this remedied," Adan said. "I understand the capital cities in Origin have some of the best genetics designers."

"Genetic manipulation is forbidden. 'To alter one's body for vanity is an affront to the Fates.'" Erelah recited, defensively. She winced, suddenly realizing how much a zealot it made her sound when she saw the odd expression on Adan's face.

"My uncle raised us in the beliefs of the Order of Miri." Erelah added, apologetically.

"I see." Adan sobered. He cleared his throat and pulled another too wide smile at her. "Let's talk of more cheerful things then. Shall we?"

"Yes, let's." She grinned. It was easy to forgive him. The giddy high from the success with the *Jocosta* that morning still had her head spinning deliciously. The awkwardness of the exchange did little to deflate it.

The vox device affixed to Erelah's lapel chimed, then:

"Consultant Veradin, you must come to the flight lab at once."

"For the love of the Fates, this had better be good," Adan groused, gulping the last of his wine.

Erelah recognized the voice of Tilly, her assistant. The girl sounded rattled. Impressive, as techs were seldom prone to displays of emotion.

"What is it?" Erelah replied.

"They're taking everything, ma'am."

Erelah locked eyes with Adan across the table.

"Tilly, who are *they*?

"Ravstar."

10

Erelah rounded the corner to the flight lab, Adan a half-step behind. What chaos she had imagined on the brief walk over did little to prepare her for the all-out cannibalization that greeted her. Myrna, one of the team's two other civilian consultants, stood off to the side, her arms crossed. There was no sign of the remaining four team members.

Tilly's small pale face was pinched with distressed beneath her closely clipped hair. The waif like girl rushed up to Erelah, speaking quickly. "I am not authorized to stop them, Consultant Veradin. My apologies."

Erelah glanced at the young tech's frightened expression and turned to regard the lab. "It's alright. I'll find out what's happening."

A flock of technicians, jumpsuits emblazoned with the unmistakable bright red Ravstar icon high on their sleeves, had infested the lab. As one pulled dataclips from a compbank, another began to physically remove the boards. One unceremoniously dumped highly sensitive calibration equipment into a crate.

"What in Miri's name are you doing?" Erelah called out.

When none of the techs turned to look at her, she glanced at Adan. His buoyant personality was now gone. Any giddiness from dinner was evaporated. His face was pinched with anger. But, oddly, he said nothing.

"I'm talking to you."

Erelah grabbed the elbow of the closest tech. The young man frowned down at her hand and then up at her, as if she bore some type of contaminant. She realized she had never seen this technician before.

"Orders. All project materials are to be removed."

He pulled his arm from her grasp and returned to his task.

"What order? This wasn't cleared by me. Who gave it?" she demanded, pursuing him as closely as she dared. This tech did not resemble the meek, subservient variety that she often encountered on the NeuTech base. He was tall, firmly built and vaguely hostile.

"Erelah. Leave it alone." Adan put a hand her elbow. There was an odd caution to his voice.

Leave it alone? How could he say that?

They were ripping apart two years of careful, intense work after their team's undeniable success this morning. *How could he not be furious as well?* It made no sense. She turned back to the tech, anger refreshed.

"Who gave the order?" Erelah asked, barring the nameless tech's way, a move she would not ordinarily consider, but at least he was forced to stop and look at her.

"You know who. Defensor Tristic."

The tech sidestepped her and returned to his task without a second glance.

"Defensor Tristic?"

But there was no reply.

Adan tugged her back to the door. He leaned in against her. "It's not worth it. Not when *she's* involved."

She looked up at Adan. His features were drawn into pensive, worried lines.

"You can't be serious."

Not Adan, too. He couldn't possibly buy into the tall tales about the seldom-seen commander of Ravstar, the overseeing division of NeuTech. As far as Erelah was concerned, Defensor Tristic was a rubberstamped name on reports and communications. For all she cared or knew, she was some detached bureaucrat that seldom took interest in the tiny, under-resourced projects at the frayed edges of nowhere—like their installation.

She had heard the stories when she first came to the station: Tristic was a Sceeloid half-breed, functioning with seeming impunity on behalf of the Council of First. But she had always thought they were just that, stories. Now, something in Adan's expression told her otherwise.

"This is ridiculous," Erelah said. "Tristic has no right to come in and just take what's ours."

"She does. And she can." He shook his head. "It never belonged to us, Erelah. This all belongs to NeuTech. NeuTech belongs to Ravstar. Ravstar has the final word."

"Truly? And I'm also to believe children's tales about some Sceeloid mongrel—"

"Quiet!" Adan pushed her into the corridor. Surprised, she stumbled against the wall.

He shut the door to the lab. "Be careful, Erelah!"

"Careful?"

"Tristic has eyes and ears everywhere," hehissed.

"You're serious?"

He would not look at her. Instead, he leaned against the jamb, arms folded as he focused on a point on the wall.

"This has to be a mistake. We just had a breakthrough." Erelah planted her hands on her hips. Her brain raced through options, scenarios as she began to pace. There had to be some logical explanation behind this.

"There is no mistake when Tristic is involved. The whole reason they're here is because of the *Jocosta*'s success today," he replied, flatly.

She stopped, mid-pace. "How'd she even find out?"

Adan squirmed, turning the motion into a shrug. But he did not look away from the tiny spot on the wall. He sounded as if he were reading a contract:

"All project records are subject to review."

"That's not what I asked." Erelah stared at him. The tiny hairs stood up on her arms.

"This wasn't meant to happen like this. Myrna wasn't even supposed to be in the bloody lab. They would have seized the records and equipment. And we would have moved on to the next project."

"You *told* Tristic! Why? You knew we still had more work to do. There's the velo field instability, the possibility of chrono-slip. Any one of a thousand things could still go wrong—"

"Ravstar expects results. That's how this works, Erelah," said Adan. "This isn't one of your damned Kindred society functions. There are no polite rules. Defensor Tristic isn't some functionary with an empty title."

"Someone has to go to the Defensor. This is ridiculous. She has to understand that this is a mistake. That we need more time."

Adan gave a curt laugh. "A novel idea."

"I'll go. Tonight, before they destroy the whole lab," Erelah said. "Come with me."

"You don't get how this works." He gaped at her, then looked away. "Your uncle really did lock you away from the Worlds, didn't he? This is no place for a

naive girl. You should have gone off to the convent, little priestess. It would have been far safer for you to stay on Argos."

Erelah glared at him. *Oh, Uncle. How right you were about these people.*

"Perhaps you are right, Adan," she replied, lifting her chin. "This is not my place, but it's the life I have chosen. And this is the right thing to do."

Drawing her shoulders back, she turned on her heel. Despite her movements, a vague tremor began in her knees. It was as if Adan's apprehension were contagious.

She was already striding to the level riser when Adan rushed to catch up.

"Erelah, stop! You don't know what you're doing. Don't confront Tristic."

"I'm simply going to talk to her. Try to make her understand."

She looked at him levelly. As if on a dare, she pressed the button, calling for the command tier. The doors opened promptly.

"Erelah. I'm begging you. Don't." He put a hand inside the closing door, trying to bar the lift from leaving.

"I'll come right back." Gently, but firmly, she removed his hand from the doorframe. "Promise."

The doors closed. Erelah never saw Adan Titus again.

"Wait here."

That was all the pinched-faced attendant said before disappearing into the darker recesses of the command tier. The entire level apparently belonged to Tristic. An opulent allowance for anyone with the rank of Defensor.

As she stood there, Erelah resisted the urge to tug at the cuffs of her jacket. The high collar pinched at the neck. The material was too new. Smelling of synthetic materials and esters, it itched fiercely.

She was very poor at waiting. Even as a child she would fidget and sway on her feet and think of the endless tick of seconds that she could be using elsewhere.

Count to ten. Breathe. Just like Uncle used to teach us.

Uncle had warned me and my brother, hadn't he?

She had been unprepared for the bureaucracy of NeuTech, but not entirely surprised, considering Uncle's long winded rants during supper in the great echoing hall of their home. His tirades had worsened when Jon ran away to join the Regime. Her brother's departure seemed to weaken the towering Helio Veradin. His ensuing illness was little surprise to Erelah or to the servants that remained.

That was long ago. And Tristic was not Uncle, although probably just as aloof and secluded.

The stories claimed Tristic was the product of experimentation from a time before genetics tampering was commonplace. In an effort to further understand and control the enemy Sceeloid, hybridization experiments were sanctioned with Eugenes subjects. And as the only success, Tristic had been permitted to live. However, seeing a hybrid rise to the title of *Defensor* was impressive and a plain testament to this odd being's talents. The gossip claimed she was nearly preternaturally intelligent and, understandably, fixated in her hated of the Sceeloid.

They say she can read your mind. See the color of your emotions. She knows truth from lies by just gazing upon you…

Erelah gave a strange, nervous giggle. Even someone as well-educated and savvy as Adan Titus was convinced by these rumors. *Ridiculous.* If she were to believe such stories, she might as well find a more imaginative one. Perhaps Tristic ate people as well, like Sceelo, the great dragon of myth.

"The Defensor will see you, Lady Veradin."

She knew that voice and cringed internally as she turned. Lieutenant Maynard had crept into the room behind her. His hands were folded behind his back as he stood over the Ravstar emblem set into the high gloss of the floor.

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Erelah kept her expression blank, hiding her revulsion.

He nodded to her slightly, respect absent. She received the distinct impression he was very aware of the image he presented in his prissy special ops uniform that she secretly detested. Certainly he reveled in his role as the Defensor's new second. No one had dared to speculate on what had become of the previous aide.

Since Maynard's assignment to the installation, Erelah had interacted with him only twice before. There was something that struck her as simply *off* about him. Perhaps it was the way he watched everything with his dark little eyes, or his constant smoothing of his own uniform, as if to call attention to his special rank.

On their second encounter he had cornered her in the officer's lounge, being so bold as to invite her to share down time in one of those disgusting chambers they called rec suites. Erelah had burst into laughter. At the time she had honestly thought he was joking. This odd little man was asking her to…

She smirked. Maynard's expression soured, seeming to guess the course of her thoughts. For the moment her anxiety was forgotten as she followed him into the adjoining chamber where Tristic waited.

11

Defensor Tristic waited at the farthest end of the suite, propped in a plush chair on a raised dais. The lights were dim. Erelah could discern only a misshapen form with a stooped back and sinewy arms. A medical attendant hovered obediently nearby until Tristic dismissed him with a flick of her gloved hand. Erelah felt her dread thicken.

"Consultant Veradin, I trust you were not waiting long." The words were spoken in High Eugenes, but the voice that carried them was a peculiar reverberation to it, almost mechanical.

The diction and accent were nearly perfect. Except for the silly game she had played with Adan, Erelah rarely heard High Eugenes spoken among the personnel of the NeuTech installation. She most certainly did not expect to hear it now, in this time or place.

"Defensor Tristic." She nodded stiffly, secretly grateful for the move to High Eugenes. It was the only language she had spoken most of her life. Commonspeak was used for interacting with servants and common Citizens. Even terse Regimental still proved difficult for her at times. "I was not waiting long."

"You are a horrid liar, Veradin." Tristic uttered a strange grinding sound. Erelah realized it was a laugh.

The Defensor made another gesture, summoning Maynard to her elbow. They conspired in a secret conference. The lieutenant looked up at Erelah as he listened to his superior. That same dread seemed to harden in her stomach. She watched as Maynard, almost tenderly, helped the Defensor step down off the dais.

"Leave us, Lieutenant." Tristic gave a regal wave of her gloved hand, her full attention on Erelah.

She thinks herself queen here. And the outcast aberration was granting an audience to a member of the Kindred. Tristic enjoyed this, Erelah realized.

"Yes, Defensor." Maynard nodded, faltering slightly. An almost disappointed expression flit over the aide's face. His dark eyes fell over Erelah as he clipped past her.

The doors shut, echoing in the vast chamber. And she was alone with the queen of a strange dominion.

This was a mistake. I should have listened to Adan.

Erelah felt cold, uncertain, but she tried her best to stave off the spreading apprehension. Clasping her hands at her waist, she drew her shoulders back. Old Sissa would have been happy.

You are a Daughter of the Veradin Kindred. Act like it.

Although her earlier anger from seeing the lab pulled apart had evaporated, she tried to draw fuel from that pride.

"I owe you congratulations on your recent success on the j-drive project. What is it you titled it… *Jocosta*, I believe? It is a stunning achievement for your team," Tristic purred as she moved with sure, firm steps into a circle of light cast by one of the room's few glow spheres. Erelah could not help but stare at what that light revealed.

Miri was blind to permit such a monstrosity.

Tristic was as hideous as the rumors described. Her features most definitely spoke of a Sceeloid heritage: the pale, nearly translucent skin covered in a layer of fine scales, pointed angular features, blue-tinted lips on a mouth that looked like a gash. But the eyes. The eyes were incongruous in that face. They were a dark, somber brown, suggesting the purest of Eugenes bloodlines.

As a child, Erelah would have given anything for eyes that color.

Perhaps that is what made her stare the most. It was the summation of this the hybrid's strangeness.

"Yes, Project *Jocosta*. Thank you… Defensor," she stumbled, realizing she had not yet replied and had simply been staring. She was uncertain of the protocol in addressing Tristic. Old Sissa had never mentioned grotesque hybrids in her lessons on manners.

"Hideous, am I not, Consultant Veradin?" Tristic asked. That odd mechanical buzz followed. An errant shaft of light picked out the cause. Embedded in the skin in Tristic's throat was a small piece of tech, resembling a vox. It was the source of the noise. Speech augmentation, Erelah realized with a shudder.

"No matter," Tristic offered. "Over the years I have grown used to such… reception."

"Apolo… apologies, Defensor," Erelah stammered. Mouth gone dry, she tried to swallow.

She could no longer fathom why it seemed so important to have demanded this interview. Her nerve had long fled, and her next words seemed to come from someone else.

"The j-drive may seem successful, but I come to ask why you have taken the project from my team? There is still much to prove before the vessel is worthy. For instance, there is the destabilization of the subspace field. At too close a distance to a larger vessel's velo engines, the j-drive can cause a catastrophic failure in—"

"I'm aware. I'm aware," Tristic replied, her voice seemingly distracted. She stepped closer. Erelah became aware of a strange odor: a nearly sweet-smelling stench. The smell of water jasmine and rot.

"Tell me. How is it that you do not prefer to employ your hereditary title of *Lady* Veradin? It sounds far more… elegant."

She paused, trying to guess the wayward pattern of this conversation.

"In honesty, Defensor, it's just a title. The equivalent should have belonged to my brother, Jonvenlish, as he's elder. I would be happier if that were the case." Unbidden, Erelah gave a nervous tittering laugh. This was not at all what she had planned.

How do I take my leave now? I should have never come here.

"Yes. The dashing Captain Jonvenlish Veradin. Quite the specimen of Kindred valor, I understand." To Erelah, her tone seemed to mock. "Has his own battalion of breeders… forgive me… *volunteers*… to command. You must be quite proud. Is he as handsome as you are lovely, Lady Veradin?"

Erelah strained a smile. "You flatter, ma'am."

"*'Let us be judged by our actions, not by our titles'*," Tristic said, quoting one of Helio Veradin's tomes.

Still playing the game, Erelah fell back to the patter of courtly dialogue. "You honor me, Defensor, and his memory, to be a student of Uncle's writing."

"Helio Veradin was a principled man during an unprincipled time. Yet there are those who saw him as a traitor for his support of the Human invaders."

Erelah stiffened, but did not reply. This was dangerous ground. To speak in his defense would be viewed as traitorous. But she could never dishonor the man who raised her.

Tristic seemed to move with a grace incongruous to her form as she circled closer still. The cloying water jasmine and rot nearly overpowered now.

"You were born to the Veradin Kindred, then?"

"My brother and I were children of Uncle's servants. He named us as wards and heirs after their deaths."

Erelah tried not to look directly at those eyes. Instead, she focused on the junction of Tristic's neck and shoulder, the sway of her dark cloak, the glimmer of the Defensor crest affixed to her collar.

"Have you ever encountered a Human, Veradin?"

Tristic stalked in a slow predatory circle around her.

"Ma'am?" She faltered. "No. Never."

"Vile creatures, really. Substandard, yet almost… endearingly imperfect." The Defensor muttered distractedly as she paused to activate an interface console. Her attention was fully back on Erelah as she asked, "What do you know of the Human infection of Eugenes space?"

This was beginning to feel like an interrogation.

"As much as any Citizen. It has been nearly thirty years since the Purge." She turned to follow Tristic as she resumed pacing. "They invaded our territories and conspired with the Sceeloid against us."

"Rote and memory answer. Like a student's. That is not the complete truth."

"I don't understand."

"There are those who have suggested that the Humans were the fabled *Palari*, the lost ancients. After all, it would explain their appearance and their nearly identical physiology to the Eugenes."

"That is one view." *Be careful, Erelah.*

The Defensor was looking through already well-trampled soil. Helio Veradin had been vilified over and again for his defense of the alien invaders that breached Eugenes space, calling themselves Human. As much as she loved her uncle and sought to protect his memory, Erelah had no wish to share his fate. The days of the Purge were well gone. The Humans had been erased. Yet this strange creature before her, for some inexplicable reason, appeared driven to revive it all.

"Your sect, the Miri sect, shared this view. And the devout, like your uncle, bore the punishment for their heretical teachings."

"The Humans are not the *Palari*," Erelah said quickly. "The Palari are a thing of myth. The Council of First declared it so." It was the expected response.

Humans had been in their infancy of interstellar travel when they literally stumbled upon Eugenes territory. They looked like any Eugenes. But they lacked

uniformity; they were the embodiment of chaos. It was firmly rooted in their very nature. Every size, every shape, every combination of coloring. They spoke many tongues and carried all manner of gods with them. The beings never had a chance. Uncle had told the story many times, his face etched in sadness in the glow of the hearth. He would often speak of it after their pilgrimages to the decrepit little shrine of Miri that had been erected on Argos ages ago.

The mother of the Palari, Uncle had said. *No mother should see her children hunted so…*

"Meeting one's idolized ancestors only to find them inferior would be disappointing, to say the least," said Tristic. "It was wise of First to recognize the threat that the Humans' inferior genetics posed. They bred with the wild abandon of parasites, threatening the Eugenes careful honing of dynasties through genetic manipulation and selection. They carried the dangerous genes that made their kind susceptible to the influence of the Sceeloid."

"You speak of sight-jacking?" Erelah replied, her disbelief blossoming.

"You have heard of this ability, then?"

It was a thing of legend, a story Old Sissa would tell to frighten Erelah and Jon as young children. *Beware the Sceeloid who can drain the wills of lesser men and misbehaved children. He will make you a slave and command you to do his bidding.*

"Yes. But how does—"

"And yet, Helio Veradin risked the power and holdings of his Kindred to defend the Humans, the Palari. For defying First and for speaking against their annihilation, your Kindred suffered, did it not?"

"It did."

"A pity." Tristic clucked her tongue. The vox in her neck made it sound like click of insects. Erelah shuddered.

"Defensor, I apologize for taking your time." She realized how desperate her voice sounded and didn't care. Anything to get free. She took a step back, beginning her retreat. "Perhaps we may discuss the *Jocosta* project later…"

Tristic ignored this. "Did you know I met your uncle once? Well… 'met' suggests an air of something more… social. More like I was *presented.* My makers, the genetics masters, were so proud to show me off. I was the only of my brood to survive, you see." Tristic's mouth split into a grin. There was no amusement in her eyes. "So lonely being the last of your kind… is it not?"

"I… uh…imagine so, ma'am."

"I had proven myself so much more useful than a simple test subject, even then," Tristic continued. Her gaze seemed to turn inward, voice pulled soft in reflection. "Your uncle was a towering figure in his prime. You should have seen

him, draped in his cloak of office, crest of his Kindred gleaming. And he looked upon me like some… *thing*."

Tristic frowned at Erelah. Her voice pulled into a growl, made more alien by the vox device. "The abject pity on his face."

"I'm sure he did not mean to insult—"

But Tristic was not listening. Her pacing quickened. "'*What have you done? Destroy this thing. End its suffering. This is an affront to the Three.*' That is what your cherished uncle said of *me*."

Her damning gaze turned on Erelah. "Something like that leaves an impression, wouldn't you agree?"

Erelah chewed her lip. She took another cautious step back.

"But that was not all." Tristic stopped pacing. Her voice flattened. "By the graces of my Sceeloid heritage, I could read the energies of warm bodied species like the Eugenes… and similar races. Your skin flushes when you lie. Your heart races to betray your secrets even if you remain silent. I could truly see right through him as I do you, *Lady* Veradin. Your righteous uncle with all his preaching of mercy and virtue, held secrets. Little did I know one of his secrets would one day grace me with her presence."

With this Tristic leaned closer, her face mere inches away. She reached out and caressed Erelah's jaw with a gloved fingertip. "And such a lovely one."

"Defensor Tristic." Erelah stepped away and tried her best to force the fear from her voice. "I am sure I do not know what you mean."

Tristic watched her face, studying. Again, her reply was distracted and off hand. "Ah. You speak the truth. How odd that he never told you. Your uncle knew there are Humans living among us, masquerading as Eugenes."

Insanity. And Erelah found herself mired in it with no clear means of escape.

"Veradin, you are no more Eugenes than I. You are Human."

"What?" Erelah choked. "What are you talking about?"

Tristic regarded the interface station once again. The holoweb display coalesced to a new configuration. Erelah recognized her profile.

"Those are my personal records—"

Tristic was deceptively fast and strong as she clutched the front of Erelah's tunic. Like a doll, she felt her body flung toward the display. Her forehead struck the glass. With her face pressed against the screen, she saw her own profile: *Medical history. Genetics.*

The Defensor's voice became a deep wet growl against her neck. "What do you know of your true parents?"

"Please stop! Let me go," she howled.

"*Your parents!*" Tristic demanded. Her fingers twisted against Erelah's neck, sending a cascade of painful needles down both arms.

"Nothing. Uncle's servants. Father died of hard fever before I was born. Mother was infected even as she bore me." Her reeling brain floundered.

"Lies! Helio Veradin was a traitor to the Eugenes and a Human sympathizer. He kept you and your brother hidden."

"Uncle would not lie!"

"I know it is by some accident that you even came to be here. Your *uncle* forbid military service, did he not?"

This was a mistake. Titus had tried to warn her. Now her pride had driven her directly into the path of madness.

Neither the Regime, nor Fleet would for a moment allow a Human to survive in its midst, let alone serve in high security research. Tristic was clearly paranoid. Erelah had to find a means to reason with a lunatic.

"It would be impossible for a Human to be inducted. The Regime would certainly know."

"The Regime knows *nothing*!" Tristic spat, releasing her. "There are tens of thousands of personnel on a single carrier. Dozens of carriers in a single battle group. How could First track them all, know the secrets of them all? That council is populated with complacent fools!"

Tristic spoke outright treason without fear of reprisal. No one knew Erelah was here. Only Titus and Maynard. Surely Titus would say something? Do something, when she did not return soon? But there had been such finality in his voice. The fear in his expression had told a different story. And Maynard was clearly Tristic's creature.

The Defensor's attention snapped to the holoweb interface: "Display thermal imaging."

The visual representation changed. It was Erelah, but not. Her shape was outlined in tremendous pinks and searing white-hot color.

"Like a full-blooded Sceeloid, I glimpse heat and emotion as complex patterns of color. This is what I see when I look upon you, Veradin. This is a Human thermal image. You are not Eugenes. You are inferior. You are Human."

"No! This is madness!"

"Think! You knew you were different even as a child. You observed other children grow sturdy and tall. How different they were. Granted, it spurred you to greater intellectual accomplishments, perhaps overachieving in time. But

always you existed in the protective shadow of your uncle. You and your brother were his damning secret."

Her brain reeled.

Tristic may command the respect of the Council of First, but she was clearly unstable. Why create this fantasy? Until this encounter, Erelah had been a stranger to her. She was one of many on the NeuTech installation and not worth a second glance. Only her foolish pride had brought her here.

"I'll wager your brother is of the same ilk. It was his hurried induction into infantry that allowed him to go undetected. Oddly, I cannot obtain his records. An interesting coincidence, no? Perhaps the hand of your uncle. One last reach of power before his death?"

Something like jealously entered Tristic's tone. "But you are their beloved Kindred class. Who would even question your breeding, your pedigree? I am sure they were more than happy to invite you both into their ranks. After all, full genetics screening is for breeders and low-born conscripts."

Erelah's legs folded and she slid down the console to sit upon the floor. She watched Tristic rage on in what seemed like a rapture.

"Your so-called uncle and his compatriots altered you both. It was enough to fool a cursory examination by a dull-witted country physician or a simple gene culling mech for recruitment. Oh, but look closely and there you are, hiding in plain sight. I almost envy the simple elegance of it."

"Manipulation of genetics is forbidden." The words spun in Erelah's head. It was hard to pluck them from the air, tumble them into order.

"A tenet of Miri your uncle chose to ignore in the case of you and your brother. How *special* you must have been to Helio Veradin for such great lengths to be taken. How truly *loved* you must have been by this man to betray his own kind," Tristic purred, standing over her.

Erelah shifted, pushing her body back in a crab-like crawl along the gleaming dark floor, trying her best to distance herself from the hybrid that no longer seemed sickly or weak.

"You may have continued for decades, living this lie, floundering in your imperfect Human container. You may have excelled still, dwelling right under the very gaze of First. Perhaps even counted among their leaders one day. Your uncle did not anticipate you encountering me. I am an anomaly, the product of a chance unhappy encounter with the questionable blessing of my… talents. Ironic, really."

"This cannot be," Erelah croaked. Truth or not, it was clear that Tristic believed it. That was the gift of insanity: anything could be justified. Any evidence

to the contrary could be easily twisted to support the Defensor's argument. That was a lesson Uncle had tried to impress long ago. It was as evident in the actions of First as it was in this strange monstrosity before her.

"Think of it, *Lady* Erelah. Of all the choices and possibilities, the things that had to go just right, to place you in my Path. Well. It's as if the Fates designed it." Tristic turned a frightful grin upon her. "You are *perfectly*… imperfect."

"Why do this?" She grasped for the right words to offer up in protest. "If this is true, why I am I still here? Why have you not reported me?"

The silence that followed was filled by the roar of blood in her ears. Tristic tilted her head. With everything in her power, Erelah wished that she had never looked upon this monstrosity.

"I have use for you, my lovely child." Her smile was hideous.

12

Time came apart. Occasionally, Erelah realized it as a whole, spread out in a logical progression. The remainder was fragmented nonsense. Just as time moved slowly near the event horizon of a collapsed star. That was what Erelah circled. Time moving on, tortuously slow. And all the world she left behind moving on with ignorant normalcy.

Instead she counted time by the number of different brilliantly lit rooms, smelling of antiseptics and filled with the detached curiosity of barely glimpsed others. At first there had been relentless questioning, sleep held at bay for eternities. She tried reasoning, pleading, threats: all to no avail. The thought of escape was an impossible fantasy.

After all, there were rules. Told to her only once, but delivered by Tristic with a firm expectation of absolute obedience:

"Do as you are told, comply, and your brother's secret is safe. Disappoint me and he will perish. Do not doubt my ability to enact this. I stand with his heart in my hand and all I need do is squeeze."

Erelah would daydream that Jonvenlish had found out what was being done to her. He would come to rescue her. Appearing like a warrior from the early days of the Expanse, he would break into the cell. Together they would run to safety.

Sometimes she would go for long stretches without hearing another voice. There would be blissful darkness after the pinch of needles and the whisper of rough fabric against her body. Then the true pain began. Glinting steel of machines and instruments that measured and tested. Injections of things that made her curl into a tiny ball of agony and seek to claw her brain from her very skull. It became a cycle. Her fear rose and fell like tides governed by an ellipse.

The scientist that Erelah had once been knew in a hazy, formless way that she was the subject of study for Tristic. That it was not random curiosity or blatant cruelty that motivated their acts. She had fit some kind of criteria: *Perfectly imperfect.* There had been others before her. None of them had survived this far, she came to understand from overheard snippets of hushed exchanges. It made her valuable, in a sense.

"Today is an anniversary of sorts for us, my love. Two years."

Maynard paced around her in another nameless room of gleaming metal and rough white. It was common for him to appear and whisper his petty torments. Then-Erelah, the one that came before, would have rankled at how he addressed her. Now they were just words, permitted to eddy past. Words could do no harm. That was left to other things.

Two years? Had it been that long? Why would he lie?

"Perhaps, Lady Veradin, if you had taken me up on my offer… things could have been different." He ran a hand over the oily hood of his slicked hair, preening in the reflection of a polished surface.

She could laugh at him, if she wanted to surface and actually listen. As if he could have enacted something that would have changed this. She had realized that everything Tristic did had had been planned long ago. The Defensor could foresee every outcome, every variable. It was not the product of a preternatural gift, but a horrifyingly cunning intellect.

In truth Maynard was just as afraid of Tristic as anyone else. Erelah could sense all over him. But instead of shrinking inside his fear, Maynard wore it like a camouflage, the way a sand dragon used bits of rock and debris to burrow into its surroundings. Maynard would have been dangerous in any time, any place. This place of monsters was ideally suited for him.

Instead Erelah chose to stare at him silently until he looked away, the sneer slipping from his pointy rat-face. Then the idea took root in her. It was a rarity for her. It belonged to then-Erelah. Usually, she detached herself in the current of time and allowed events to flow around her, like a current buffeting a great stone under water.

Maynard was just a man. Men had weaknesses. She could find his, find some leverage, some crack. Escape was impossible, but just knowing that she could affect her limited world in the slightest would be worth the attempt.

It took energy to pull free from the depths where she dwelled. Courage earned punishment, she had learned. It also put Jon at risk. She had to be cautious.

"Lieutenant Maynard, perhaps I was hasty to dismiss your suit." Although her voice was rusted from disuse, Erelah addressed him in High Eugenes. It was meant to flatter him, although it was well above his station. He would never merit the chivalries granted to respectable company.

"Too late for that." Maynard toyed with a long, neat tray of surgical instruments.

"It's never too late. We can be friends, can't we? I get so lonely here."

She leaned forward on the gurney, hoping that she did not look as she imagined: pale skin, red-rimmed eyes, and gaunt cheekbones. This would probably matter little to a man like Maynard. Perhaps to a creature like him, it was an enticement.

"You didn't want my kind of friendship. Remember?"

He plucked at the plain cloth shift she wore. It was a faded dull blue material.

Blue was never my color. I had a blue fire-silk gown once. Uncle had given it to me for my ascension ceremony at the temple. I was to wear it only on special days because fire-silk was dear, but I wore it into the fields that time to chase scythe cats—

Don't go away. Focus!

"What if I had a change of heart?" Her mouth twitched with a fraudulent smile.

She leaned further, intimating. There were no restraints. The lab techs had stopped using them long ago. Her obedience had made them lazy, complacent. After all, where would she go? They had left her in the small room. The one where they would give her the injections. But for now they had disappeared behind a glass wall, busy and distracted and probably grateful to not be near Maynard.

"Really." He sounded largely unconvinced, but amused.

Yet she sensed an edge, even if he was just toying with her. How many others had done this before? Bargained? Tried to offer themselves? It was an entertainment for him, she realized.

Maynard placed his hands on either side of her thighs, trapping her against the hard metal surface. His dark eyes were eager.

"I bring you news of your brother, Jonvenlish." He watched, thirsty for her reaction.

At the mention of Jon hope sparked and the foggy haze in her brain lightened.

"Jon?" She breathed the word, like a prayer or a wish.

This was Maynard's game. He loved to ignite that spark of hope and then snuff it out.

"His battalion of mangy breeders was assigned to Tasemar," Maynard said, feigning sadness. "Stupidly, he chose to go in with the ground detachment. The odds, my lady, did not bode well for them."

Maynard drew closer, waiting to absorb her hurt. He would lap it up like a thirsty animal. "Even now, the Fleet Captain has been told to withdraw, to abandon the losses there. Your brother is among that number."

Erelah felt the shuddering sob build in her throat.

"It would be an honor to comfort the last Veradin." Closer still, he leaned against her. His hand went to her thigh. She recoiled at the feel of his cold skin.

Jon would not die. He had to stay alive.

Part of her had always assumed she would know if her brother had been truly lost. She would have felt it like the shutting off of a lantern. Its light would be suddenly absent and she would feel her universe dim.

Did Jon miss me*? Would he mourn* me*?*

The nature of Ravstar's mission was classified. Even if Jon had petitioned for the right to contact his sister, she knew he would have been denied. Erelah Veradin would have slipped beneath the dark glassy surface of oblivion with barely a ripple in her wake.

Maynard made a hushing sound. This was part of the parody he enjoyed. He played the part of a caring paramour and feasted on her anguish. But he knew nothing of love or compassion. Her reflex was to tear his hand away. She reached for the bare skin of his arm, seeking to injure with her fingernails.

Erelah was unprepared for what came next.

A wave of pricking heat pounded up her arm and into her spine. Her head sagged. She tasted copper as she bit her tongue. The images were a collage of torture and rage. It came in a sudden violent wave:

Bleeding flesh, naked twisting anguished bodies, keening mixed with a woman's shrieks. There were dozens of them: women and men. Each a disappointment for Tristic and ending up staring at Maynard's bloody smile.

"Tristic gives us to you… when she's done. The ones before me. The ones that didn't work out," Erelah rasped, not aware she had even spoken.

The smug sneer on Maynard's face evaporated. He tried to pull back but her hand was frozen in place around his wrist.

She *wanted* to force him away. Something within her *pushed* out at him, like fingers digging and parting the slick loaves of his brain. More images jumbled behind her eyes, with them a foreign memory of Tristic's water jasmine and rot voice:

Veradin shall be the new host.

"Get her off me." Maynard barked.

"Host?"

Erelah was distantly aware of the sounds of panicked techs rushing to the room.

Strong hands wrenched Maynard free. He stared, wide-eyed, as he massaged his wrist. Dark hair slipped into his eyes across his pale forehead. His bravado was gone. There was something else there: fear.

She liked it. He knew. He had realized what just happened and he was afraid.

"You're just as big a monster," Erelah breathed. "Maybe worse."

"Quiet."

Impossible to stop, the words now poured from her in a frantic torrent: "Your mother knew what you were, even before you did. That was why your father sent you off as a conscript. They found you with that poor servant girl and saw the bloody work you had done—"

Maynard shoved her. Her head collided with the wall.

Around her, she was dimly aware of a panicked scramble among the techs in the suite. She soon felt the injector at her bicep. A soggy darkness drowned out the sterile world and Erelah dreamed of running across winter fields on Argos, of a little girl in a blue fire-silk dress being chased by a rat-faced monster with great bloody teeth.

The stars blurred, framed by the tiny portal in Erelah's cell. Hastily she wiped the tears away.

She felt *them* around her as she always did when she was alone like this: the Human women who had come before and were as unlucky as she to fall into Tristic's grasp. It was worse now, knowing what had truly become of them.

Erelah knew it was her imagination. Old Sissa had told her that the Fates would not suffer ghosts; every child knows that. Nyxa may end a soul's fleshy torment, but her sister, Natus, collects your eternal spark and returns it to the night skies where you rejoin those who have gone before you.

Ghosts or not, Erelah felt their echo. How many had survived this long after suffering Tristic's tortures? They urged her in a chorus only she could hear, like one of the morality plays performed at the temple on Argos during the festivals of Miri. The spirits of the dead warriors would goad the wounded hero to victory.

Avenge us, they called.

I am weak, Erelah told them. *I cannot be your champion.*

Tristic would be back soon. She had been called away by the Council of First. But no doubt Maynard had informed her of Erelah's little trick in the lab today. It had surprised them both. Erelah ventured it was an aberration, something new. Tristic would be anxious to return.

After all, Veradin shall be our new host.

Erelah had hours since waking in her tiny room to guess what that word meant: *host*. All of the conclusions she reached were dire, darker than the last. The images from her connection with Maynard had faded, but she realized he had watched many tragedies like hers. Never before had it been with such urgency. None of the others had survived the treatments to this point. Her body was being changed somehow, rewritten.

Defensor Tristic was dying. It was written in the ragged wet quality of her breathing and the way she sometimes grimaced in pain as she moved. There was the nearly constant presence of a medical attendant in her wake. *Tristic* was the one running out of time.

Was I to be host to her? Would she take my body like an ocean creature takes a new shell? Or something worse still?

Host.

Erelah knew it meant an end for her.

It came to her in a flash of clarity, so rare these days. The whole of Tristic's plan. The Defensor was playing a long game, practically dynastic in its design.

By somehow becoming Erelah Veradin, the Last Daughter of a noble house—no matter how sullied a past—the half-breed Tristic would no longer be an outsider, an abomination. First would be quick to forgive a flawed Kindred past when offered something as valuable as the *Jocosta* and what it represented. Everything would open before her. And in an unhappy footnote, her unlikely mentor, the twisted abomination, Defensor Tristic, would have succumbed to her long illness, leaving Erelah Veradin appointed to control Ravstar. And from there, inside her, Tristic would grow, like a cancer.

13

Compared to the quiet of the lab, the crew levels were a jarring chaos of light and noise. Erelah stumbled through the crowded corridors, gracelessly led, and sometimes carried, by Maynard's two men. There were no shackles. Nothing to suggest she was really a prisoner. Nonetheless she felt them staring: the techs, a few sub-officers. Their curiosity was plain, and with it a vague type of envious awe. As if to be a party to Tristic and her secrets imbued Erelah with some special quality. If only they knew. She sneered at their faces, her head bobbling on her neck.

Maynard scowled. But he was fearful still. No more posturing.

"You disappoint me, my love." He said. "I'll show you no more favor."

"For that I thank Miri," she slurred in High Eugenes. Her head buzzed with the pharms, but she held onto that one bright thread of clarity that had come to her in the anguished quiet of her cell. Somehow it would be her salvation. Somehow she had to use it. But how?

They entered Tristic's now familiar chamber with its ceiling that disappeared into the dimness high above. Maynard receded to the shadows that hugged the wall, where she knew he would watch with sick fascination.

"You have been keeping secrets from me, Lady Erelah," Tristic said, climbing down from her throne-like chair. The evil queen from a child's tale holding court in her dark lair, menacing and all powerful. She liked to use Erelah's title, throw it like a barb, a reminder of who she once was. It was a reminder of the warm and safe, a realm she could never regain.

Erelah tucked her chin against her chest and shifted her gaze to settle onto a black corner. She listed on her feet. Inwardly, she felt herself withdraw, disengage. The room became distant.

A stinging slap brought her back into the present. She caught the blur of Tristic's hand moving away and tasted blood between her teeth.

"You exist because I wish it, foolish child. I could have reported you a hundred times over by now. I have shown you mercy. To your brother as well."

"*Mercy*. What do you know about *mercy*?" Erelah croaked. "You cannot touch Jonvenlish. I understand that now. Even you have limits. I know what I… *saw*."

"Is that so?" Tristic canted her head. Those deep brown eyes moved from her to peer at Maynard.

Somewhere in the shadows was a nervous twitch of fabric. Maynard cleared his throat. "Defensor, allow me to explain—"

"You are dismissed, Lieutenant." As she spoke, Tristic continued to watch Erelah. "You and I shall speak later. Bear no doubt on that."

There was the curt echo of Maynard's brisk footfalls in retreat.

Then Erelah was alone with her.

The beast drew closer, studying. The now too familiar stench of water jasmine and decay assaulted Erelah's nostrils. With a gloved hand she prodded Erelah's chin, pulling her gaze up to meet her own. When she tried to turn away, the fingers dug in, stopping her.

What would happen, I wonder, if I touched that scaly white skin? What hair-it horrors will I glimpse?

Erelah shivered.

"Physical contact with a subject triggered the Sight in you. Remarkable. Better than I had hoped," Tristic congratulated herself. "I wonder if emotional distress or pain are triggers…"

When their gazes met, she felt an impossible wave of heat emanate from Tristic. It was the sensation of passing a hot stove in a cold room. With it came the familiar pricking sensation that had enveloped her in the medsuite with Maynard, but far stronger. It pressed against her temples and pounded down her neck. An oily, alien presence invaded her thoughts. She wanted to twist away, but her body was riveted to the spot. Tristic was doing this somehow.

"What did you see, child, when you touched the lieutenant? You know of his sordid past. But what else?" she snarled. "Tell me."

Although she intended to say nothing, Erelah heard herself speak in gasps: "Images and feelings. I *became* Maynard for a moment. I know what he knows. About you. Your plans."

"Pray… continue." Dark amusement in her gaze.

Another wave of pressure churned inside her skull. Her own body betrayed her once more. She listened to her voice like that of a stranger. "They do not know what you do here. The Council of First. They don't know what you do in Ravstar, don't want to know. Once in a while you crawl into the light and offer them a new weapon to prove your usefulness. They praise you like a pet. You have learned secret things about them for leverage. But there is a limit to your reach. It has gotten you this far, but you want more."

"Well done." Tristic granted her a black smile, staggered slightly. Then seemed to collect herself.

Erelah gasped. The pressure in her skull dissolved. She found she could move once more.

"This entire time you thought you were protecting your brother," Tristic said. "Yet now you understand. Don't you? It was a means to control you. To disclose your secret nature as Human to First would mean your Kindred would be declared renegade. And you would become useless to me."

"Useless as what?" she sobbed.

"Oh. Come now. Do not pretend."

She knew the answer: *Host.*

"No."

Tristic grinned. "You are the vessel into which I shall be reborn, Veradin. I shall slip this ruined body and assume yours. And in turn your body shall bear new life. The origin of a new dynasty."

Her finger caressed the line of Erelah's cheek. "At last, you are ready."

The two guards ushered her through a twisting maze of corridors that grew quieter and less populated. Even the rumble of the *Questic's* engines seemed softer underfoot. Erelah found herself in a room that looked nothing like a medsuite. The buzz of the pharms in her system was ebbing. Now details were easier to make out as she peered about the space. The lighting was soft, not clinical. The walls were adorned with costly relics and artifacts of long-conquered worlds. This, she realized, was the dark queen's den. This space belonged to Tristic. She froze,

shoulders drawing up to her ears. As the haze of the drugs abated, an icy panic seeped into her.

"Let's make you comfortable," one of the guards sneered, his arm on her elbow.

This one's name was Caveo. Erelah recognized him from the scar-pocked skin along his jaw. He often accompanied Maynard in his self-important strutting though the ship.

Caveo grabbed her restraints and secured them to the bulkhead a few feet above the floor. The odd angle forced her to kneel to alleviate the pressure in her wrists and arms.

"What a shame…." Caveo tsked down at her. He licked his lips. "Sweet looking little thing. All gone to waste."

"That grotesque half-Sceeloid bitch," his partner added. She had never bothered to learn his name. "Not one to share, is she?"

"Not that I'd want what's left."

They laughed.

Erelah kept her eyes on the floor beneath their boots. A thick rug woven with threads of fire-silk covered the space. She stared mutely at the glint of the reddish threads as she withdrew *inside*. From there she watched the world in detached silence, although panic gnawed a path up her throat.

"Tell me, pretty." Caveo yanked brutishly at the tangled mess of her plaited hair. "Do you like that? Is she *all* Sceeloid where it counts, that bloody ugly witch?"

She did not move, did not speak. Eyes forward, Erelah peered through the genetic misstep of a sub-officer.

The Sight, Tristic called it.

Old Sissa had told stories about the Sight. It was the gift the Fates used to see into the hearts of men and know their worth. It was how the Fates judged right and wrong. And how they knew the thoughts of misbehaved young boys and girls who set out on adventures in the wilderness beyond the manor without permission.

When she was an older student, her tutor had told Erelah the story of Miri, the Fate who had her Sight stolen by Sceelo, the dragon, when he consumed her body. The demon had wanted the Sight for himself to make him a more powerful enemy of men. Brother Elid, her teacher, had explained that the theologians considered the story an ancient allegory for the Sceeloid's ability to dominate the wills of lesser species, something later called sight-jacking.

Lesser species.

Her mind creaked through scenarios like a neglected machine, rusted from disuse. If there was anything that made a hierarchy of species believable, it was the existence of men like Caveo or Maynard. The grotesqueries she had seen in the squalid folds of Maynard's diseased brain made her shrink from the idea of using this Sight.

Could I control another, like Tristic? Like a Sceeloid? Could I sight-jack as well?

And just maybe… maybe.

Caveo reached down, his hand moving to touch her face. Erelah steeled herself.

"All secure, Sergeant?" Maynard's needling voice interrupted.

The two men went rigid with attention.

"Yes, sir."

"Then why do you remain? Leave!"

The guards scrambled from the compartment.

Maynard moved closer. He bent at the waist, hands on his knees as he peered down at her. How many times had this been a dark fantasy for him? And with how many unlucky others had he made it a reality?

"I used to consider your naïveté charming, can you imagine that? The peasant Kindred heiress come to the high polish of Ravstar's domain." Maynard gave a curt laugh.

"What's going to happen?" She swallowed against a tongue like paper.

He affected a lovelorn sigh. "Dearest. I come to say my farewell. And to grant a parting gift to you. Well… two actually."

"Going somewhere?

"You are. Permanently." He reached out to touch her, then withdrew. "You will be ready to receive Tristic. And Erelah Veradin… well, the part that's *you* at least, shall cease to be. This lovely face, this beautiful shell will be filled with such great purpose."

Maynard knelt. "A shame that matters must now involve your brother. But that has always been the plan. He is no longer useful in assuring your compliance."

Fear spiked her heart. "Jon has done nothing. Leave him alone."

"You are stupid, indeed, little peasant." He scoffed. "After all, he is the last living being that knows you, the *former* you and your inconvenient secret. An untidy loose end."

"You're lying."

He leaned closer, gloating. The parody of a lover moving in to steal a kiss. "I sent the warrant myself, Veradin."

"Bastard," she hissed.

"Your outlook will be far different when we meet again, *Lady* Erelah."

He fished an object from the inner pocket of his jacket. The light caught the glint of the glass cylinder. It was a jector.

"And now the second gift that I promised, my love." He looked down at the device, no doubt relishing the terror it evoked in her. "This is an incredible moment. I wish that you could fully appreciate it as I do."

"No more drugs. No more." She squirmed back, straining as far as the restraints would allow.

"You'll like this one," he shushed. "Tristic need not know. It is my gift for you. It will make you *not care*."

Maynard tilted the jector. The amber colored contents shifted slowly inside the glass vial. "This will allow—"

Now. Please work. Even if I cannot touch him. Please work for me.

She dug into that icy little thought farm that Tristic was growing in her head, picturing its twisting black sinews writhing in the delicate white flesh beneath her skull. The remembered odd heat and pressure filled her head. And she *pushed* out at Maynard, full force.

The expression on the man's face blossomed into wide-eyed panic. He swallowed several times, but seemed unable to move away or break her stare. Then he wheezed out one word: "How?"

Erelah pushed harder. Tiny capillaries throbbed in her vision, keeping time with her pulse. The weight of it was exhausting as she forced the command into his head.

"Let me go."

A small trickle of blood slipped out of Maynard's nostril and onto his lip. He coughed, sputtering flecks of blood. Then slowly, his hands moved to the metal shackles that bound her wrists. They tumbled to the carpet with a muted clink.

Once freed, Erelah collapsed back to her haunches, but kept her full attention on Maynard. He seemed bolted in place, eyes forward as he uttered a string of choking nonsense words. His hands contracted into claws. Tendons stood out in his neck.

She rose, watching him. His dark little eyes rolled around in their sockets like trapped creatures. A new pain started in the back of her head. He was fighting back. Her hold on him was lagging.

Inhaling sharply, Erelah summoned her strength for one final *push*. She visualized crushing his skull beneath two massive red hands, pulverizing bone and brain.

Maynard uttered an anguished cry. With a satisfying thud, he collapsed to the gaudy carpet face first. Erelah felt a sharp tug. The thing in her head crawled back into its black den. Pain flooded into the void it left. It was nearly enough to drown out rational thought. She doubled over, clasping her head.

Erelah kicked him solidly in his exposed ribcage. He offered a wounded grunt, but did not stir. His breath came in uneven gulps.

"Bastard."

When she flipped him over, his face was a bloody smear. His nose had obviously broken when he landed faced first.

Good.

Erelah snatched the identkey from around his neck. All of his access should be hard coded to it and high enough to enter any level on the *Questic*. But she only needed it to enter one place. The flight deck.

"Here's *my* gift, love!" She grabbed the jector and plunged into the side of Maynard's neck.

Her adrenaline surge was fading. The pain in her head was maddening. Dots swam before her eyes and the room tilted around her. Erelah wanted nothing more than to find her own dark den and sleep beneath the pain, wait it out. But there was no time. Tristic was no doubt on her way there.

There was one place left to go. She had glimpsed its silvery lines and deadly frame in the wretched landscape of Maynard's thoughts.

Jocosta.

The corridors to the station seemed to twist and lurch beneath Erelah's feet. The pain welled and pulsed into the soft tissue of her brain. But the thing residing there had gone back to sleep.

She forced her strides to be purposeful and steady and fought the urge to run. So far no alarm had been raised. Miri knew how long it would take before they found the lieutenant.

The flight hangar was near, if she could trust the glimpse from Maynard's mind. If not the *Jocosta*, then any stryker would do. She could pilot. The memories were rusty, but she knew the basics.

A wave of vertigo forced her against the wall and she reached out. Her hand encountered yielding fabric. With a surprised grunt, she looked up into the startled eyes of a Fleet tech. The young woman was the customary frail frame with pale skin. Her hair was shaven so closely it was impossible to tell what color it might be. Her eyes were such a dark brown, they appeared black.

"Ma'am?" The tech recovered. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Fine."

Erelah straightened, pulling away before the tech could touch her again. She took a quivering stride past the tech, forcing her body ignore the shifting, dizzy tide in her brain.

"May I be of assistance, ma'am?" she called after Erelah.

Was she suspicious? Erelah wore a plain flight suit with no insignia like any other consultant.

"As you were." Erelah tried to sound irritated.

But the tech pursued. "I've seen you… with Lieutenant Maynard."

Erelah moved faster, taking in the corridor designation. *One more tier to the flight hangar. Or was it two?*

"You're mistaken."

"No. I know you. You made the *Jocosta*."

Erelah stopped and wheeled around. Surprised, the tech stepped back. "Where is it now?"

"Ma'am?"

"The *Jocosta*. Tell me where she is *now*."

Suspicion darkened the tech's expression.

"Tell me."

Erelah lashed out, grasping the girl's forearm. The same dark wave of heat built along her neck and extended to her fingertips. Too late, she realized: She had kicked the monster awake again.

The tech whimpered, sinking to her knees. Blood trickled from her nose.

"Here. Right here." She made a flopping gesture with her free hand.

Erelah looked over and saw the hangar doors. She had hurt someone needlessly. Abruptly she released the tech's arm. The girl became a sobbing heap on the deck.

"I'm sorry," Erelah breathed. She held out a hand, hovering, afraid to touch the girl again.

Suddenly, the klaxon's angry buzz split the air.

PART 3

14

For days, it seemed, Sela drifted in and out of sleep. Occasionally Veradin would wake her with an order to eat or drink. A Regime medic, armed with decent pharms and a proper medbay, would have had her back to baseline within a day. Even without such resources, her body would be far quicker to heal than a natural born Eugenes. But to Sela it still felt like the mending process was taking far too long. She did not relish the thought, that, in her injured state, she was more of a liability than an asset.

This had been her longest stretch of wakefulness. In a semi-daze, she wandered the antique Cassandra. Her initial tour with Valen had been hurried, and only to check the worthiness of the vessel for the captain's escape. Now Sela took in the details, her mental catalog of concerns growing.

Each compartment held clues of scenes from overlapping ages. Sela likened it to engaging a holovid story near the end, after all the action had already occurred. The EVA suit racks stood empty. One lone helm with a cracked visor rolled on the floor of the chamber, like the unhatched egg of some mythical space-faring creature. The common passage was marred with burn marks from plasma and compression weapon exchanges. Crudely etched graffiti in Regimental was covered by layers of common and Zenti clan marks.

The smugglers that had owned the vessel before were not surprising in their tastes: the amount of non-reg pharms was rivaled only by the number of interspecies skin vids. Smuggling must was either an incredibly lonely occupation, or it attracted individuals with raging libidos.

Whatever the smuggler's current whereabouts, Sela would have loved to ask him where the damned weapons were hidden. There must be some; it did not

make sense to abandon a vessel if the worst of your cargo was a stash of cut-down Hypetox and a few skin vids.

She could find no additional consumables either, other than insta-cal and packets of stale protein wafers in the galley's lockers. Their rations would be depleted in a few days. As a breeder, Sela's metabolism was designed to run on minimal rations in emergency circumstances. She could manage. Veradin could not boast the same. Water was not a problem, if they were careful and not fussed about hygiene. The state of the filtration system would need to be addressed sooner or later, but it continued to hold.

An off-key twittering lured her from the galley, where she had spent considerable time staring at the remaining protein rations. Like an automaton, she made her way to the command loft, a semicircular space whose recessed grav bench was shared by pilot and navigator. It was the Regime's idea of efficiency in design, not comfort. Veradin was asleep on the grav couch with his legs stretched beneath the forward consoles. The navsys and con spread a dull green glow over his form.

The destination alert rose from the navsys in an unsteady song but failed to rouse him, so she prodded his shoulder with her knee. As he sat up, raking his hair, Sela moved to the display and frowned.

Had he mentioned plotting a destination? She recalled a foggy dream in which Veradin told her the name of a frozen blue world. *Was that two… three days ago?* She made a silent vow to never take another pharm and called up the nav-logs. The Cass had apparently used only one minor flex point. That had been a gamble. He had definitely not mentioned using a conduit. But she was too tired to feel annoyed.

"There is only a stellar nav beacon," Sela said, scanning the readings. The steady harmonic signature of this world fell into a pattern in the background noise. There were no orbiting coms arrays. It meant this new destination was not developed. That was a relief.

"I would not expect much more," Jon answered as he sat upright next to her on the bench "The current residents have no need."

"What is this place, sir?"

"It's called Newet."

From the exterior view screens she caught glimpses through the strafing clouds as the Cass broke atmo. A few massive structures dotted the scoured plains of the planet's surface. No vox traffic pinged back on the comsys. This moon

was a brilliant, icy-blue marble trapped in a slow ellipse around a dwindling star. Silent. Cold. Forgotten.

Then she realized why.

A young 'scripter had once told her about the cresters' body dumps, a gangly boy named Ecrid with a face left scarred by the hard fevers. At the time she had imagined just that: a great stack of bodies reaching into the heavens on a nameless moon.

She fought the urge to fidget. "A body dump."

"The Regime calls it that," Jon reprimanded. "It suggests they're discarded junk. But that's not what they are. They're my ancestors."

"They're dead. They lived in glory. And crest— Kindred hide them here like broken things."

Inwardly she shuddered at the idea of her used-up corpse sealed away in the rotting stink of soil or stone vaults. Forgotten by the living. Sela had always known that upon her death, her remains would be returned to the sanctity of space, the birth place of life.

"We do this to honor them. This is the world where the Veradin Kindred are taken." The quiet reverence in his voice was very different from the man she knew. "Kindred once loyal to ours rest here as well. One day, I shall too."

A day far from now, if Sela could help it.

"Why *here*, sir?"

"They won't think to look for us here. You need time to heal."

He tapped the screen, leaning into her view of the console. The terrain mapping outlined an immense structure of stone and metal.

"Put us in here. It's not too far to walk."

"You don't mean we're actually going inside one of those tombs."

"This is probably the safest place to be right now. I doubt the dead care much about harboring two deserters."

An icy breeze whipped around them the moment they stepped from the protective hatch of the Cass. This place was not the monstrous heat of Tasemar. The air was thin here. The simple act of walking had her stopping frequently to catch her breath. Sela had spent weeks in a similar environment for acclimation during primary infantry. Under those conditions a third of her fellow booters had succumbed to fatigue.

She turned a worried look on her captain. Veradin had not received such training. Destined for officer's ranks, he would not have needed to set foot on such an inhospitable world. He bent over with his hands propped on his knees as he panted.

"Perhaps we should return to the ship, sir." Sela kept the eagerness from her voice.

It just felt *wrong* to be here.

"No," he wheezed. "This is something I have to do."

He took a hit from the canister. The distress on his face evaporated as the oxygen-rich air hit his lungs.

She kept her protest silent and righted the day kit over her good shoulder.

"Not far. Let's move," he said, staggering forward.

As they picked their way along the eroded footpath, Sela examined the horizon. At this distance, the necropolis could have been any settlement founded in the early days of Expansion. But there was a strange stillness to the scene. No ships darted on and off the landing field. No lights, save those meant for decoration, pulsed out of the stone walls into the milky dusk.

The path wound between two steel obelisks that thrust proudly into the thin air, marking the entrance. Script in High Eugenes adorned the structures' sides. Sela paused, canting her head. The scribble was meaningless to her, a long parade of pictographs and hash marks. She knew only the graceless scrawl of Commonspeak and the more direct iconic missives of Regimental Standard. High Eugenes bordered on sacred language. No breeder would ever speak it, or presume to read it. It was meant only for the cresters.

"It bears the names of the Kindred dynasties who lay at rest here," Veradin explained. "Veradin and others that were allies even as far back as the time of the Expanse."

Sela's reply was automatic, the product of her training. "It's not for me to understand, sir."

He tapped a long row of characters. "*Corsair. Novian. Veradin.*"

She backed away, appalled by his casual tone. *Somewhere, Lineao is laughing at me.*

"I can teach it to you, Sela. To speak Eugenes too."

The thought was like chewing on metal. "It's not for me to—"

Veradin seized her hand and held it against the cold surface. Sela recoiled as if stung.

"Fates be praised!" He said sourly between hits of the breather. "You weren't turned into a pillar of ash."

She cradled her hand, massaging the fingers as if the brief contact had hurt. Her voice was barely audible to herself above the lonesome howl of the wind. "You shouldn't do such things, sir."

Veradin chuckled. It turned into a wheezing cough until he took a long draw on the canister. Sela watched him. He should have acclimated somewhat by now.

"You're not a child, Sela. First tries to keep you like one."

Her mouth went dry at hearing the priest's words in her captain's voice.

"It's just stone and metal," he rasped.

"I know, sir. This is all just very… different."

Sela hated the nervous tremor in her stomach. And hated her hesitation. *I have been declared renegade and traitor. I have defied the Regime and Decca, made a personal enemy of Trinculo and* this *causes me to waver?*

"I'm going in," he said. "You can stay here. Enjoy the weather."

She watched him disappear into the cool shadows of the mammoth tomb and was left to the baying of the wind.

This was the summation of her career under Captain Jonvenlish Veradin: watching him dive into strange unknowns without fear or hesitation, all with his signature casual arrogance that enraged and enthralled her in the same breath. In many ways he was like a boy, reckless and needing her protection even from his own nature.

Who is the child here, Captain?

Then finally, Sela followed him.

The pressure in the air changed as the door sealed behind her. Inside, Sela was embraced by the mellow amber light of the sanctuary. A faint rhythmic sound twisted on the dry air.

Music for the dead. Did it play constantly? Or was it for the benefit of the few bereaved who came to visit?

Veradin seemed to guess her thoughts. "It's not always playing. It's all for show."

His color had returned. The air in this place, although slightly stale, was more suitable.

"I'm sorry about… out there." He made a vague gesture. "I shouldn't have done that. It's just that I hate the things they tell you to believe. It's not right."

There was a fleeting anger in his expression, but she realized it was not directed at her. For what felt like the thousandth time in the past few days, she searched for a suitable reply to one of his rages against Decca and turned up nothing. She simply nodded.

"You can stay here, if you want." He added, looking away. "I'm going ahead."

Sela was not about to wait in this place alone. She did not fear the dead, only what reckless feats he might attempt if she left him unattended.

"I'll come, sir."

He smirked. More mind-reading. "I'm not going to do anything *strategically unsound*."

Sela arched an eyebrow at him.

"Come on, Ty. I can't get into too much trouble here. Promise." He extended a hand to her.

The corners of her mouth curled up into an answering grin and she placed her hand in his.

Before them stretched a long corridor of red polished stone, presumably the main passage of the structure. Its walls curved and folded into dimness far above, as tall as a docking bay on the *Storm King*. Smaller passages branched off in regular increments, five to a side. Designs filled the walls in gilded flourishes inlaid with what looked like jewels. To Sela it seemed a waste. Truly, cresters might as well have been a species she had never encountered before this day. She felt her earlier trepidation begin to dissolve.

"All this for the dead," she said.

She paused at a massive mural: the Fates engaged in some mystical communion. Natus. Metauri. Nyxa. She frowned. Although having clearly been done by a far more skilled hand, it was similar to one in Lineao's temple. There was a new detail. A fourth woman, equally serene and beautiful, had been included with her three sisters.

A fourth Fate?

"Miri. The fabled mother of the *Palari*," Veradin said. "Oh. You're not supposed to know about her. Shall I report you?"

She rolled her eyes at his mockery. "Yes, have them add it to the list of charges, sir."

"A joke from Sela the Immortal. Good," he chuckled. "That's good."

As they pressed on, she saw more paintings gracing the ornate walls. More carvings of warriors from the time of the Expanse grappled with mythical beasts. Firesilk tapestries draped from high above with depictions of elegant women reclined in couches. High Eugenes writing seemed to be on every available surface: the walls, the floors.

They turned into one of the connecting corridors.

"This one." Veradin halted before the rendering of a crester nobleman frowning out into the hallway. Carved from dark red stone, the statue was a good three heads taller than either of them. Its hands were those of a giant, folded across his waist in contemplative repose. The robes were unfurled in a frozen wave to suggest the play of a breeze on the fabric. Emblazoned in the middle of his chest was the crest of his office.

Veradin gestured at the gold crest. Sela estimated it was the size of a shatter grenade. On it was cast the shapes of four sinewy women, probably the Fates.

"The thing of a bygone era, like its owner," her captain said with a slim smile.

In the days of the Expanse, when Eugenes came to dominate the Known Worlds, the wars were fought by the ruling warrior clans. They were the early ancestors of the Kindred. The officers wore enormous jewel-encrusted crests. They started out as armor, but grew into these gaudy things that had no other purpose than to advertise a Kindred standard. The bigger the crest, the richer the Kindred. The wars by then were fought by breeders and 'scripters.

As much as they distinguished Kindred from the breeders beneath them, the crests made them easy targets for killing and capturing. As a consequence, the enormous badges fell out of favor. Now they were tiny icons stitched in metallic thread on their cuffs and collars.

"Who is this?" Sela asked. It did not seem right to talk above a reverent whisper in front of the frowning giant.

"Sela Tyron, meet Helio Veradin." Veradin's voice hitched in guilt or sadness, perhaps both. "The man who raised me. My uncle."

"Helio." She rolled the name over her tongue, like a forbidden taste.

"You would have liked him. He enjoyed bossing me around, too."

Sela nudged him with an elbow, but turned away slightly to hide her grin.

Veradin stepped closer. "My parents died. I don't remember them. Erelah was an infant. We lived with Uncle after that."

Here was another rare glimpse of her captain. Sela panned the torch over the remainder of the enormous alcove that was the Veradin Kindred tomb. There were six other statues, smaller in size. Half were male. Half were female. All were carved in similar states of repose, and all wore dour expressions. A gentle ambient light slowly filled the vault, making it easier to see the rich detail of the room. She realized that they must have tripped a sensor on their approach. The corridor seemed to be warming as well.

"They look really…" Sela could not think of a word that would not insult.

"Solemn?"

"Upset." They looked pissed that anyone would want to stuff their corpse into a stone box and then put it on display.

"I guess anyone would be, considering how the Council of First treated them for believing the Humans could have been the palari." He turned to her. "Imagine your whole life worshiping something, only to find out you were wrong."

"Are your parents here too, sir?" Sela asked. The one called Uncle looked nothing like her captain.

"They were just servants." The light of his torch picked out script near the shoulder of Uncle. "But their names are there."

Sela swallowed. "Read it to me."

He took her hand. This time she did not pull away. With her fingers, he traced the shapes in the stone as he read the words.

"*In memory of those lost: Jonah and Meredith. Miri guide you home.*"

A sadness filled his voice, as if he had forgotten something vital. It made her chest tighten. She realized she had been staring at him. Sela cleared her throat and regarded the visage of Uncle.

"Is *his* body really here?"

"No. He was cremated and rests in a tidy little urn in the gallery of First. I imagined as some sort of example against renegade Kindred. I'm sure his eternal spark is tormented by that fact."

Sela frowned. They had *burned* him.

"It's not like he was alive when they did it," he said with a dry chuckle once he saw her expression.

Embarrassed, she looked away, panning the light across the room's other eternal occupants.

Veradin placed his hand on the crest decorating his uncle's chest.

"My boy, what have you done?"

They both started at the disembodied voice. Sela's rifle was in hand instantly. She bodily moved Veradin behind her, backing him against the wall of the crypt.

"Identify yourself!" she challenged, searching the dim corners.

"Stand down, Ty." Veradin guided her arm down to train the weapon on the floor.

The hum of a hologrid crackled to life on the floor before Helio Veradin's statue. A male form, identical to the likeness of Veradin's uncle but more realistic in stature, flickered once and then solidified.

Sela felt suddenly foolish for over-reacting –after all, it was only a program. But still an urgent sense of danger jangled her nerves. This was *wrong*, different beyond any forbidden glimpse into the world of her superiors.

"An avatar?" Sela spared a glance at her captain.

At the sound of her voice, the avatar's simulated gaze trained on her.

Its tone was flat: "*Identity of second presence is unknown. This message is secured. This message is intended for Jonvenlish Onid Veradin, Son of House Veradin.*"

On a basic level, Sela was not surprised. After all she was just a breeder. Somehow this thing had recognized her as that.

"Bloody Uncle," Veradin muttered. He stepped forward. "I'm Jonvenlish Veradin, Son of the Veradin Kindred."

"*Confirmed.*"

Her captain held out a beckoning hand to Sela. She stepped to his side with the plasma rifle still ready.

"Identify second occupant as non-hostile," Veradin said.

She snorted. Now *that* was funny.

Veradin shot her a warning look before turning back to the avatar: "Identify second occupant as Commander Sela Tyron, soldier of the Regime."

"*Jonvelish Veradin identified. Second occupant identified.*"

The posture of the avatar relaxed, returning to a more lifelike stance. Head tilted, it regarded Sela before looking to the captain.

"*The soldier cannot be here, Jon. What I have to say is only for you and Erelah to hear.*"

It looked back at Sela. "*Commander Tyron, you cannot remain. This message is not for your ears.*"

Sela instantly turned to leave. She'd had enough of strange crester customs and insults for one day. But Veradin sighed and grabbed her good arm.

"Command override," the captain groused. "Authorization seven…velda—"

"*Command override does not exist.*"

"Commander Tyron is an ally of the Veradin Kindred," her captain snapped, before adding a comment in High Eugenes.

The avatar replied in the same language. More nonsense words to Sela. Then her captain's posture changed, sagging. It was plain he would not get his way.

"You can't be here." He looked down at the floor, defeated.

"Yes, Captain." Sela said quietly. "I'll go back to the ship."

"Ty." He turned to look at her. "I'm sorry."

Sela granted him a terse nod before moving into the corridor. As the dimness of the corridor enfolded her, she felt her throat tighten under alien tears.

15

I should not have left him there. That was wrong.

As she cycled the hatch closed to the Cassandra, the words came to Sela over and over, like one of Lineao's useless prayers.

Something was very wrong here. There was secrecy and shadows. Sela was not a being of nuance and subterfuge. She fed on actions and their ensuing results. In this new realm she would surely starve. Her hands folded into fists. There was nothing to fight here. No target.

My boy, what have you done?

The first words from Helio's avatar.

The greeting was not exactly a pronouncement of welcome or loving joy left for a long lost relative. The words had been filled with admonishment.

Have you done something, Captain?

Muttering a string of directionless curses, she climbed the ladder to the command loft. There were things to do: sys checks, fuel calibration for atmo.

Later. She would think about all this later, she lied to herself. It was one of her favorite bad habits. So, she forced herself to focus on the battered screens of the command loft.

Time crawled past.

Just as Sela's worry was starting to solidify and she was ready to grab her gear and return to the vaults, she heard the cycle of the outer hatch of the ship's midsection. Quickly she launched herself down to the common passage.

Veradin entered on a gust of frigid wind. He bent over, taking in the warmer recycled air of the Cass with giant gulps. Eyes shut, he slid down the wall of the pressure lock to rest his forearms on this knees.

"Sir?"

He opened his eyes, but he did not look at her. Instead he stared at the wall ahead.

Broken. He's been broken.

Sela was struck with the undeniable feeling that although he did not appear injured, Jonvenlish Veradin had been seriously damaged. She stood over him and triggered the hatch to cycle shut. Hesitantly, she placed a hand on his shoulder. "Sir?"

He flinched as if startled. Suddenly, he pitched forward to his knees. His arms encircled her legs in a clinging embrace and he rested his head against her stomach.

Sela froze. Her hand cradled the top of his head in a reflex. She had never touched him before like this. She had never seen him this way.

"What is it, sir? Are you injured?"

Outside the winds howled like spike hounds looking for a way in.

His voice was muffled against the fabric of her uniform. "Forgive me. I didn't know."

"Forgive what? What's happened, sir?"

She gazed down at the top of his head. Her heart stammered in time with her brain: Broken. He's broken.

He pulled away so sharply, she staggered.

"Captain?"

Climbing to his feet, he retreated to the command loft without answering.

As Sela pulled up the small ladder with her good arm, the deck lurched. The engines roared in protest as he forced the Cass into a rapid ascent.

His back was to her as he quickly entered commands into the interface.

"I don't understand. What's happened, sir? Where are we going?"

He did not turn. "Stop calling me that."

"Captain?"

"That! Stop it!"

It stung. A sudden swell of anger eroded her trepidation.

"Then answer me!"

But still he did not face her.

"I didn't know. I couldn't have known."

"Known what? What did that… thing say to you, sir?" Sela jostled his shoulder.

Finally Veradin turned. His eyes were red-rimmed. He drew in breath, hesitated. "You have to understand. I didn't know. Uncle never told me—"

The proximity alert split the air. Another ship was on approach.

No.

Sela dove for the sens-con, colliding with her captain.

Not now.

She frowned at the specs on the newly arrived vessel that was just approaching the outer reaches of Newet's thin atmo. The craft was too small. A ship that size would not be so far from conduit space on its own. It needed a carrier or a base for support. There was nothing like that out here. No way would either have escaped their notice.

"That can't be right." Veradin echoed Sela's thoughts, reaching past her for the controls.

"It's reading right… sir." Sela swatted his hand away.

"A ship that small has no range, has no support."

"Another crester come to look at their dead relatives?"

"I doubt it."

Sela studied the specs again. The signature matched a non-velo drive vessel, but the energy reads were enormous.

"Let's get the mains back on. Fast." He seemed to have surfaced from whatever crisis had seized him.

Sela flipped to the enginesys and grimaced at what she saw. The smuggler who owned this bucket had been a brave one indeed. The Cass needed serious dry dock time. The velo drives had so far proven reliable, but the sub-light burners were another story. It was as fast a ship as any self-respecting blockade runner would want, but the non-reg upgrades were problems waiting to happen.

"This is going to be ugly," she muttered. At least if we explode, there will be nothing left to capture.

Veradin ran a hand through his hair, mussing it further. It made him look even more crazed. Perhaps that was why she was not surprised at his next order.

"Do a pass. Five hundred."

Sela gaped. "So we can do what…. wave at them, sir? Our weapons are antiques."

He was being irrational. They needed to leave. Now. One stryker could mean a carrier on its way. They needed to evade, not go on the offensive in a poorly armed rust bucket with a cancerous cesium manifold.

"Ty, trust me," he said.

I did. I do. But her trust was being seriously tested now.

"Call it a hunch, Commander." A pleading note entered his voice.

A hunch.

She hated it when he used that word. It meant he was guessing. And it often meant Sela Tyron got to be mop up.

With an impatient growl, she made the change.

They waited in silence as the Cass glided in closer to the new vessel. Their attention was split between the reads and the forward display on the screen.

The tiny ship seemed to coalesce out of the dim gray of low orbit. It was a very familiar shape, yet there was something different about it.

Veradin muttered something in High Eugenes, his tone sounding incredulous.

Then she saw why.

It was a stryker. The jutting nose and forward arch of the wings were unmistakable. But instead of the customary flat black with green-and-yellow markings, the craft was an uneven silver.

He studied the reads. "The engine signature is… different."

"No weapons." Sela found it hard to believe the sens-con. Who would neuter a warship like that? Why?

"A trap. Has to be." But even as she said it, Sela realized it was absurd. The Regime did not spring traps like this. Even a moderately resourceful Enforcement agent would have long ago made their position and moved in for the kill.

"Vox?" Veradin asked.

"And tell them what, sir?" Sela snapped. "That we're pathetic?"

He ignored her and reached across her to open a channel.

As the vox flipped in rapid succession through the known Fleet coms, they watched the image relayed by the forward cameras.

"There. The hull markings." He tapped the screen. The isolated image was enlarged. The red and black standard of Ravstar stood out like a warning. The tiny hairs on Sela's arms stood on end. In her life as a soldier of the Regime, Sela had never encountered a single Ravstar soldier. The entire division was intrigue and myth. Now the damned emblem was popping up everywhere.

Why here? Why now?

"Erelah," he whispered.

"Your sister? How? Why here?"

"Jon." The breathy whisper could have been any errant noise from the vox. More words came through coated in static, this time in High Eugenes.

He reached in front of her again, barring her view of the controls. Sela shouldered him back, capturing his hand against the console. He had triggered something, but she could not tell what.

"What're you doing, sir?"

"Erelah. That's Erelah. That's her voice."

"What? You have no idea who that is, sir!"

An alert chirped. The Cass's androgynous voice asked for confirmation to deploy the docking web. That's what he had triggered.

"If it were Enforcement, they would have moved in. We'd be dead and you know it."

Sela studied his face. The fit that had engulfed him when he returned to the ship had evaporated, but the red-rimmed gaze and desperation it left behind were no better.

She sighed. "Sir, this is—"

"Strategically unsound." He finished her sentence, mocking her tone.

He placed a hand on her good shoulder. Sela shrank away.

"Please trust me." He stepped closer. "We have to take her on board."

"I do trust you, sir. Every day. Every second. With my life." It was her turn to sound desperate. A new thought gripped her. "But this is madness, sir. Is she why they arrested you? Erelah?"

Again, the Cass prodded the tense air with a series of off-tune chimes. The docking web was ready. Neither of them moved.

"I'd explain this if I could, but I don't have your answers. But that was her voice. You heard it too."

"I don't know what I heard."

Sela wanted her captain back, the one who made sense. There was real danger here. Could he not feel it? It flooded the room with an undeniable current.

He placed his hands on both her shoulders. Gently, he leaned forward, pressing his forehead against her. Weariness came off him like radiation.

"We don't have a lot of options out here. I can't tell you what's going to happen next."

"Run. Fight. But think. Always think." Her voice sounded thick, drugged. His closeness did that to her. "You taught me that, sir."

"I know. And what I did to you wasn't fair. Bringing you here without a chance to choose. Now you have to trust me. Do you trust me?" The plea in his voice was a rusted hook in her heart. "I need to know that there's one thing left that makes sense. That you trust me. Do you trust me?"

Squeezing her eyes shut, she released a long held breath. "Always, sir."

His smile was grim. "That's my girl."

16

"This whole damn thing is skew," Sela said unhappily.

She stood at the hatch to the cargo hold and studied the stryker through the small portal. Her fingers worried the webbing of the holster slung around her hips. The pistol's charge light was a baleful red.

"Understood, Commander," Veradin replied as he peered over her shoulder through the thick glass.

Their view of the space was limited. The internal cameras to monitor it were non-functioning, something that posed little surprise to Sela. The cargo bay was designed to be large enough to host two troop runners at a time. The ship's docking web had deposited the stryker closer to the center of the bay. She was glad to see that tactically there was room to maneuver around the vessel.

The voice of the Cass declared hangar pressurization in Regimental. Veradin's hand hovered over the palm interface to cycle open the lock.

"Be ready."

Her nerves were long, tense wires plucked by every sound and sudden movement. She could be no more ready.

The lock opened. The cold air of the hangar swirled past their ankles as it met the warmer air of the companionway. Sela was swift to move. Weapon trained on the canopy of the stryker, she stepped in front of Veradin and led the way down the steps to the hangar floor. She put out a staying hand as they approached the strange vessel. He sidestepped her with an exasperated grunt. Her protectiveness was often an irritant to him. But it was her duty.

Veradin stepped up on the rung just beneath the swooped silver wing of the vessel.

"Sir! First contact dictates—"

"Not now." He gestured for her to approach the craft's other side.

Sela ducked beneath the wing and took a position opposite him along the stryker's canopy. Frost had collected on the darkened slits of glass, obscuring the interior.

Veradin rapped the glass. Its sharp sound shattered the tense silence of the bay. There was no reaction from the pilot within. Sela adjusted her grip on the weapon.

Abruptly he hopped back to the hangar deck. He disappeared beneath the low arch of the wing. She realized he was looking for the emergency override for the canopy access. He must have found it because she soon heard his victorious shout.

They were treated to the hiss of escaping heated air from the cockpit. Ice fractured and fell to the hangar deck and a small column of steam snaked upward. The smell of charred circuits and burning plasteel filled the bay.

Sela climbed up on the stryker's wing then recoiled. A baking heat emanated from the darkened interior. "Careful, sir!"

As the steam cleared, Sela could see within. Coiled in the close confines of the cockpit was the pilot, chest pitched forward against the yoked flight column. Veradin reached into the space and righted the body against the seat. The pilot's head rolled limply. Long dark hair, the same shade as Veradin's, obscured the pilot's features. Sela felt her heart constrict into a cold knot even as the heat threatened to suck air from her lungs.

Veradin carefully brushed the hair back from the pilot's face, but Sela knew already what she would see. The young woman's peculiar jade green eyes gazed sightlessly up at the overhead lights.

Her. Erelah.

The captain dove into the cockpit, ignoring Sela's cautionary shout. He straddled Erelah's form, snapping open the safety harness that held her in place. He cradled her face in his hands.

"Erelah! Erelah! Wake up!"

Her eyelids fluttered. The girl's lips moved in an inaudible muttering. He pulled her up. Righting himself, he looped her over one shoulder to climb from the cockpit. Beneath the bulky flight suit she appeared tiny; nothing more than a skeletal frame.

He collapsed to the deck and pulled her into a clumsy embrace. Sela stood over their awkward family reunion with her weapon still drawn.

"Help me," he panted. "Get the medistat."

Despite the cloying heat of the hangar, Sela felt that icy kernel in her heart grow.

All the time Erelah continued to mutter. The words made no sense to Sela, but she recognized their meter and inflection. Lineao had repeated the same prayer to the Fates relentlessly as he worked on Atilio's body.

Sela stepped quietly across the threshold with the spare set of clothes, a disposable single suit found in one of the crew lockers. The garment was about three sizes too big for the waif-like Erelah, but served as Sela's excuse for explaining her presence if the captain appeared. Her real reason was not compassion, but curiosity.

Erelah slept curled into a tight ball. Her back was thrust against the wall, her knees clasped to her chest. She had made herself into a small, dense point. Even the light and clarity of the room seemed to disperse in proximity to this strange young woman. Kneeling beside her, Sela placed the clothes on the bunk and studied the still, pale features of Lady Erelah, Last Daughter of Veradin. The soft shape of the face echoed that of Sela's captain. High cheekbones, a delicately sculpted nose. The family resemblance was obvious, but the brother and sister could not be more different. Jon had said she was his junior by a few years, making her twenty-something standard. But she looked so much younger, like a girl. And nothing but a frail tech.

The Kindred ladies that Sela had briefly glimpsed on Victory days were aloof, gliding visages draped in gossamer and full of refined grace. If Jonvenlish Veradin was a brilliant guiding star then this one, Erelah, was a collapsed one.

"Your purpose. Identify yourself." The voice was hoarse, but the challenge in it was plain. It came from beneath the snarl of dark hair.

"Commander Tyron."

A sliver of pale face appeared above Erelah's tucked-in knees. There was a surety to her voice that surprised Sela. "You came to stare, Commander?"

She stiffened. "The Captain is concerned."

There was a frigid silence. Then: "Jonvenlish, the caring, dedicated brother."

Since being taken onship, Erelah had spent most of her time asleep. Occasionally she would wake to utter a string of nonsense in Eugenes. This was her most coherent round of conversation yet. A shame Veradin had chosen now

for rack time. This was Sela's opportunity to question her without his brotherly hovering.

How had she known to find us? That question was her priority.

"How did you—"

"How long have I been in this location?" Erelah's jade green stare looked past Sela into the bleak corridor. She resisted the urge to follow the girl's gaze.

"Slightly over sixteen hours onship. I don't know how long you were adrift."

The girl studied Sela.

She decided to prod again. "How did you get here in a stryker? There must be a support carrier—"

"The stryker…" Her eyes narrowed. "Where is it?"

"Safe," Sela replied. Something was not right here.

"Where are we now?"

"Safe."

Who was doing the interrogating? A sense of warning chilled Sela. It told her to keep the answers from this woman.

Perhaps Erelah had received more damage than they could surmise, but this was not how Sela had expected this conversation to go. A dark intent seem to radiate from the girl. It was written in the unblinking stare and in the quiet, incongruously patient voice.

"Commander *Sela* Tyron." Erelah's eyes shifted back. Her pale lips stretched into a mocking smile. "Ty."

A chill danced along Sela's spine. She had not told Erelah her familiar name. Perhaps the captain had told her, but she doubted this.

Another unsettling silence stretched between them in which Sela felt studied, marked.

Then a tremor shook Erelah's body. Her face sank beneath the mass of dark hair.

Had she lost consciousness once more? Cautiously, Sela touched the damp skin. The girl was like a furnace.

With an abrupt gasp Erelah crabbed back, pressing into the wall. She looked around the room frantically. "Don't touch me!"

Sela fell back onto her haunches, surprised.

Her captain's voice erupted from the doorway: "What the Fates! Ty!"

"What do you want?" Erelah sobbed, as if seeing Sela for the first time. "Who are you?"

She sneered. Was she truly that damaged? "I just told you—"

"What's going on?" Veradin demanded, stomping into the room. He tossed ration wafers and a water packet on the foot of the bunk and frowned at Sela in accusatory silence.

"I was *checking* on her," she blurted, climbing to her feet.

No way was she going to take the blame for Erelah's theatrics. As if she would want to provoke this.

"Please don't touch me!" Erelah begged up at both of them. "You don't know! Just don't touch me!"

This was not the same woman who had spoken to Sela moments ago. This was a panic-stricken waif. Erelah wedged herself into the corner and braced her arms against the walls. The confused expression on the girl's face told her this was a person in control of nothing, not even her own mind, it seemed. If it were an act, she could not see the motivation for it.

Sela stepped back. "Did you tell her my name? My full name?"

"What?" He answered distractedly. "No. She's barely been conscious."

She knew my whole name. She knows what Jon calls me.

He turned to his sister. Despite her struggles, he pulled the girl to him.

"She is obviously distressed." His voice softened as he began making hushing noises.

She watched them, two dark heads bowed against misery. Erelah's sobs became a low mutter. Veradin rocked them back and forth, uttering crooning sounds.

He looked up at Sela over his sister's head. "She hasn't your strength. She is not a soldier. You have to understand that."

Sela backed into the corridor. An ugly hitch filled her chest. It was a sensation she did not care to examine. She had been dismissed. She did not exist in their little world. She was the dumb breeder who could not even speak their language.

But Sela understood one thing. They had taken more than Erelah Veradin onto their ship.

17

I have done something wrong. Of that I am sure. But what?

When Erelah focused on the hazy scrim that obscured her memory, it refused to dissolve. But she was certain she had done something to earn that scowl of distrust from Tyron, her brother's loyal soldier.

Whatever she had done, it meant that the door to her makeshift quarters, once a storage space, was now shut. And Erelah wondered: if she possessed the strength to shamble across the room, would she find the door locked?

Am I locked in? Or is someone locked out?

/That is because he does not trust you. Your own brother./

She cowered at the voice, only vaguely aware that it had no true sound, but had crawled through her head like the hasty needling whine of insects. Eyes squeezed shut, she pressed her face against the cold metal skin of the tired Cassandra. The ship's obedient hum crawled over her, flooded her ears, rattled molars.

But Erelah could still hear her. Still feel her. Tristic.

/Your beloved sibling doubts you. His renegade soldier has his ear. Tyron tells him what to believe./

If she opened her eyes she would see Tristic pacing, hands clasped behind her crooked back.

Erelah whispered, clasping hands over her ears. "You're not real. You can't touch me now."

/On that count you are wrong/

"Stop. Stop. Stop."

It was her new litany, easily replacing any prayers to the Fates she might still tease from her tired brain. She cringed closer to the wall, striking her head against it, keeping time. Even that pain did not drive Tristic away.

"Get out of my head. You're not real!"

Count to ten like Uncle used to teach. But that was for anger. Not for this. Not for warding off demons.

/I am more real than your so-called brother. You have nothing. You are nothing. He wants none of you. You only bring him ruin./

"Stop. Please. Stop."

Tristic wanted to wear her again, her Erelah-suit. She would insert her essence like a hand within a glove.

Erelah *pushed* back. It was so hard.

She conjured cherished memories: Uncle, strong and tall, broad shoulders like mountains thrust up to the sky, sheltering her from the tangled bramble of choking half-thoughts. The endearingly bony-knuckled hands of Old Sissa covered by such soft skin that cooled fevers and calmed sickened hearts.

Harder, she pushed. And slowly, that pull began to loosen.

There was a tug, felt and unseen in that alien den nestled in her brain.

Panting she took in the room as it seemed to solidify around her.

The clawed panic in her chest subsided.

Tristic was gone. For now.

Somehow Erelah had pulled free, but she knew it was temporary. It had sapped her strength. Her brain felt as if it had been scooped from her skull, wrung out and then dropped back into place.

How long can I do this?

They left Newet by mutual, unspoken decision. Although it did require another brief journey by conduit travel, Sela saw the logic in it. They could not run the risk of an Enforcement squadron having followed Erelah.

Sela sat in the gray couch of the command loft and scowled at what she saw on the Cass's battered screens and reads. This boat was a mess in more ways than one. In concert with the clamor of the beacons and tell-tales, she muttered under her breath. The previous owners had recoded much of the system to use Commonspeak programming and calculations. Yet, some of the basic, primary elements still relied on the Regimental parent systems. As Sela performed the calculations aloud, she faltered between the two languages when it came to tech-

speak. If it weren't bad enough that the decades old interface lacked the user friendly holo projections, she soon had learned that every entry needed to be checked twice, then converted.

Sela detested such tasks, not because she felt inadequate to perform them, but because they did not involve moving or doing.

Grot work!

Sela realized that she was sulking. But she was a decorated infantry commander and a child of the Regime, not some spineless frail tech. Bring Erelah up here. If she were the genius that her brother claimed, she could set this horrid little boat to rights. She could do something useful instead of sleeping or screaming insanity.

Sela felt her scowl deepen.

There was something insidious, possibly dangerous inside Erelah, but Sela had only her instinctual distrust to present to her captain, nothing more tangible. The girl could have learned Sela's name by any means: an overheard conversation, perhaps.

Her attention slipped. One of the beacons flashed scarlet as it rejected her calculation. A quick rap of her knuckle silenced its bleat. There was a brief laugh from the hatchway behind her, inexpertly covered with a cough. Veradin.

She made to stand in his presence, but flopped back to the seat, with a startled grunt. The bench's safety harness was still fastened around her.

Wonderful, Tyron.

"Sir." Sela unclasped the webbing even as Veradin motioned for her to stay seated.

She stood, nonetheless. It was automatic. She could no more be seated in the presence of an officer than she could will the color of her hair to change.

"Sela," he said quietly. "I want to apologize." He looked down, as if he had lost his words on the deck.

"It wasn't my place to address her, sir. I'm not one of you." Sela shifted from foot to foot.

"Don't say that." He stepped closer. "It cannot be like that anymore."

Stubble darkened the line of his jaw. Shadows had formed beneath his eyes. His moves were slow like a sleepwalker. Her captain, the man she remembered, had always seemed on the edge of action, as if he possessed some fantastic idea that he could barely contain. But that was gone, she feared, for good.

What message did the avatar have for you, captain? Why would it damage you so?

"Things are going to be different now." He spoke haltingly as if fearing his own words. "They have to be."

"I think I understand, sir." This was it. He was going to make her leave.

"Do you?" he asked, as if he were asking himself as well. "I don't expect you to—"

"You offered to leave me on a Eugenes colony. I found one in the navsys. Its two days from here if we avoid conduit travel."

It was an agricolony with a minimal Regime police presence that would be easy to evade. Sela had teased its location out of the lobotomized navlogs after checking through dozens of later hacks added by the ship's previous owners.

He looked up at her, as if what she said had surprised or hurt. "Don't leave me. I can't order you to stay, but I need you."

This was not what Sela had expected.

This is what this man did to her. He always had her thrown off balance. Things that should make sense, didn't. She could never really think straight where he was involved. It was a liability, yet she could not bear to be without him.

He was still talking. "But I have to tell you—"

Sela kissed him.

Surprisingly, Veradin responded in kind, his mouth forceful against hers. They were off balance. He fell against her. The rail behind the grav couch pressed into the small of her back. She slid her arms around his neck.

This was wrong. But Sela found that she did not care.

"Ty," he whispered. His hands moved up to cup her face. "Mine."

Sela nodded in ardent agreement, uncertain of her voice. It was not a matter of debate. Yes, she was his. She could deny him nothing. At first it had been duty that bound her to him. But now the thing that held her to him ran deeper than any blood debts forged on a battlefield. It was far stronger than Decca. It defied definition, but at that moment she would give anything to serve it.

"Ty," he breathed. "It's always been you. Always."

"Captain."

He drew away, sharply. His hands fells upon her shoulders. For a sickened moment, Sela feared he had changed his mind, realized what he was doing and with what, just a common breeder.

"No more 'captain' or 'sir'," he said, urgently. "I have to tell you something."

Sela nodded, chewing her lip. Her blood raged in her ears. Drunk. She was drunk on him and in this moment. He could have said anything and she would not have cared.

He drew in breath to speak.

"Jonvenlish! *Ferhdahk est damina nasci de haste!*"

They both straightened, caught off guard under a nearly adolescent guilt.

Erelah slouched in the doorway, blanket trailing off her shoulder. The words she had uttered were in High Eugenes, but the tone had been damning. There was only one word that Sela recognized. *Nasci.* A crester's word for breeder. From her, it sounded like a slur.

Sela glanced at Veradin. His expression was shocked.

"What did she say?" She demanded.

But her captain held up a staying hand. His attention was on his sister as he barked a reply in Eugenes. His tone full of reproach.

Erelah stiffened and her expression soured. Those strange, jade-colored eyes measured Sela.

Anger blossomed in her chest. Something had been said about her, of that she was certain. Breeder. Veradin's angry tone had confirmed it was something she would not like. But what?

Erelah tilted her head as she spoke in that same perfect, clipped Regimental. "Would you like to know, Commander?"

Her voice was not a fearful warble as before. The collapsed star was back. Did the captain not see it?

"Erelah! Enough!" Veradin said sharply.

He stepped between them and spoke over his shoulder to Sela. "She does not know what she's saying… what she's doing."

"What. Did. She. Say."

Sela folded her arms. The intoxicating warmth from moments before had dissolved in a tide of acrid fury.

Erelah took a wobbling step into the cramped loft. The blanket caught the edge of the hatchway and slipped from her shoulder. She did not seem to notice. Something that cared only for pain and cold dwelled in those odd-colored eyes. It was like a wraith, too large for this Erelah-suit and as a consequence, it was barely contained and badly concealed.

How could he not see?

"I told my brother he contaminates himself by touching you, breeder. You are beneath him." Erelah bared a mocking, pale-lipped smile.

In one swift move, Sela darted around her captain's barring arm. One more step and she could hold the woman's frail neck between her breeder's fingers and squeeze until bones snapped. But she was stayed by his quiet words.

"Sela. Please."

A dark amusement danced over the Erelah's features, eerily carved by the lights of the nearby panel. She was fury masquerading as a frail young woman.

"Your breeder pet obeys, Captain Veradin. Good."

He rounded on his sister and gripped her upper arms. "What's happened to you? This is not like you. This is not how we were raised."

Erelah's head rocked back. Her mouth moved without sound. Then, suddenly, wide eyed, she looked around.

"Jon?" Her voice quivered. "What's happening?"

Veradin pulled his sister into a fierce embrace, dismissing Sela with his back as he whispered words to the girl in their secret Eugenes language.

As Sela watched, anger nestled in her chest and gnawed at her cheated want.

A shame. What a waste of such a goddess. Ty standing in the half shadow, toes to the edge of the yellow line that marked the difference between compliance and severe punishment. Leaving her there each time, each interaction drawn out on purpose, finding excuses to touch her, always knowing nothing could come of it. Maybe it was in spite of the fact it was forbidden, but Fates, how he wanted her…

Erelah sat up in a twisted knot of bedding.

It was too vivid to call a dream. It was a bundle of thoughts, feelings. All belonging to Jon, she realized. It was not stealing a glimpse, like a dispassionate third party. It was as if for a moment she had dwelled in his secret heart and found it to be a sad, quiet world filled with regrets and half-actions when it came to Sela Tyron.

When had I seen that?

She ran quivering hands through her hair.

The memory/thought about Commander Tyron had belonged to Jon. And now it imposed a confusing pattern over her own feelings toward the soldier. It was correct to say she harbored a healthy wariness of Tyron that bordered on fear. Working mostly with Fleet, Erelah had little interaction with volunteers in her brief career with the Regime. To her they were dangerous beings bred for their murderous cunning, like spike hounds trained for guarding a great house. One respected their sleek and powerful design, but they were something you would hesitate to pet.

His pet. I called her his pet.

My voice. But not my thoughts.

A flood of hot-and-cold pinpricks danced over her scalp and receded down her neck. The murkiness of her memory dissolved as she recalled the murderous anger written in Tyron's expression.

But it was not me. I had not said that.

"No," she croaked. Tristic. It had been Tristic.

Her fingers pulled through her hair to dig at her scalp. Her head was full of hot sand that slithered and whispered:

/But you did say those things/

Tristic. It was as if she had always lived there.

/You will have no rest, no quarter here. Return to me./

With a whimper she curled onto her side, as if she could physically withdraw from the voice.

"Not there. You're not there," she said.

/End this torture. Return to me, Veradin. You shall be forgiven, lovely child./

"Not there," Erelah said, more firmly this time. She squeezed her eyes shut.

She felt her: Tristic. Stooping over her, pressing so closely she could detect the faintest waft of water jasmine. All she needed to do was open her eyes, turn her head just so and she would look upon that grotesque face.

Firm hands seized her shoulders. Erelah screeched. It echoed in the flat metal of the small room.

Jon knelt beside her. His face was filled with pity. Fates. It was as bad as she feared.

"Jon." Erelah lunged to embrace him.

He staggered back with a chuckle. "Easy. Easy. Take it easy on your ancient brother."

Although his words were meant to be jovial, she noticed the dark circles beneath his eyes. A shadow of beard sprouted from his firm jaw line.

"Were you dreaming?" he asked.

Oh how I wish.

"Yes." Her voice seemed to have traveled from far away. "Bad dreams."

Jon moved to touch her arm. But she drew back. "Erelah, this will be hard for you, but we must talk. I need to understand what's going on. What's happened to you?"

/Tell him. He will think you mad./

"It's all jumbled."

"Try." His expression became an unconscious imitation of Uncle. Was this what his soldiers saw when they gave answers he did not like? Then the hardness

in his stare dissolved. She saw the brave boy who had defended her from all manner of imagined childhood dangers.

"You won't believe me."

Pity resurfaced in his gaze. "I will. Tell me."

"Uncle told us lies, Jon. We were raised to believe lies."

His face churned with doubt.

/See? It is as I said./

But she pressed on, trying her best to ignore the echo of Tristic's voice in her head.

"Uncle was too clever. He found a way to trick everyone. Our genetics were altered. Just enough. It was all just in case. He never intended for us to leave Argos, and certainly never meant for you to join the Regime..."

"Erelah…" It was a weary sigh. "Maybe this was a bad idea."

"We are Human."

Jon sat back, eyes narrowed on her. "How do you know that?"

Her chin quivered under new tears. "Because it's the truth."

He drew a hand along the back of his neck. "This is madness."

"I swear by Miri, Jon. You have to believe me." She spoke with such sudden ferocity that he recoiled

"I believe you, Erelah." His voice was quiet, defeated.

Relief fluttered in her chest. "You do?"

"Back on Newet, Uncle left a message for us in the crypt. He explained what he did and what we really are. And then he asked our forgiveness." Jon paused. "Erelah, how did you know you'd find me there?"

"I didn't. I just… wanted to be with Uncle." Her voice cracked. Newet had been the only place she could think to go in the end. That much surfaced from the hectic riot of images in her memory. "If I was going to die, I wanted to be with him."

"Baby sister, you're safe here now," he said softly. There was such guilt in his eyes.

I brought that guilt. That is mine to bear.

"This is all my fault." Erelah whispered. "You were right. I should have stayed on Argos. None of this would have happened."

She doubted Jon heard. His stare was set, focused on a riddle that he was not mad enough to solve. "It just doesn't make sense. If the truth about us was discovered, then why the secrecy? Why not declare our Kindred renegade and kill us both?"

"Because that wasn't her plan," she said quietly.

"Who's plan?"

The words came from her in a rush, staggered by sobs. "It's why she wants me. Because she could use me. I was perfectly imperfect and I was right there. I should have stayed on Argos."

Fates, I even think I sound crazy.

He moved to her side. "Who, Erelah? Is this who held you captive? The marks on your wrists are from restraints…"

She hesitated to use the Defensor's name. It would be like conjuring a demon. There was power in her name. It could stir the thing awake in her head.

/Go on. Tell him./

"Defensor Tristic."

"Who is that?"

/Your salvation from this torture, Erelah./

Stop it. Go away!

"She wants to wear me… to become me."

Jon sat back. He cradled her face in his hands. The torment in his face twisted her heart. "You're scaring me, Erelah."

"I'm scared too," she whispered, pulling away from his touch.

/You will know fear far worse than this./

18

There was a time as a booter when Sela had dreamed of being a stryker pilot. But she grew too tall. It was apparent that she had been designed for something different. Now she considered it a childish fantasy, but she still possessed the indelible memories about basic stryker design schematics and flight control layouts. If there was something out of place, she would notice.

Carefully, she studied the metal belly beneath the wing. The body of the stryker was noticeably wider at the back than a typical model seven. The propulsion access casing was definitely an odd shape. It had no visible release, which meant that the access latch was probably activated from the cockpit.

With a sigh, she straightened, walked to the front of the vessel and climbed onto the wing. Thus far her approach to examine each of the systems of the stryker had been beyond frustrating. She did not relish another fight with the stryker's compsys. It was not possible for a piece of tech to convey emotion, but this one was plainly arrogant.

She sank into the charred plastic stink of the open cockpit and focused furiously at the panel, looking for the propulsion casing release activation. This was likely to be another stalemate.

"Voice interface," she said with very little faith.

"*Verified*," responded the clipped synthetic voice in Regimental. So far so good.

"Standby for new instructional parameters."

A long pause this time. *"Active."*

"Display instructions for propulsion casing release."

"Propulsion access restricted. Primary access clearance is required."

She sighed. "What is required for primary access?"

There was an even longer pause, plainly meant to lull her into a false sense of hope, before the stryker computer replied.

"Information restricted. Primary access clearance required. Security lock-out engaged."

Sela fought the urge to hit something. "I really hate you."

"Acknowledged."

"Why didn't you wait for me?" Veradin called, descending the stairs that led to the bay.

At the sound of his voice, her back straightened. Feeling her face grow hot, Sela did not turn to look at him. An awkward mix of embarrassment and anger from the encounter in the command loft still clung to her.

"There is a twenty-three percent variation on the energy demand reads, even when the stryker is in cold mode," she answered. "I felt it necessary to investigate promptly."

That meant an as-yet undiscovered system was still active, despite the vessel's sleeping appearance. Sela feared it was a transmitter beacon or something similar that could bring an Enforcement squad straight to them. But in order to be sure, she needed access to each of the systems. The vessel's navsys thought differently, of course.

"Erelah said we would find no trackers or surveillance devices," he said.

Sela prodded blindly beneath the center console. Perhaps there was a manual override latch she had missed.

The silence pulled into a tense current.

Behind her, Veradin slipped into the jumpseat.

He leaned over her shoulder. "You don't trust her."

Sela swallowed her reply. She trusted instinct. And right now it told her there was a threat housed in the otherwise weak-looking body of his sister. How to explain it without sounding mad herself was another issue.

"It's obvious she's suffered some sort of trauma. Just look at her. Miri knows what she's been through."

That didn't begin to cover it.

She heard him shift in the space behind her, experimentally tapping at powered-down console controls. His actions were useless. None of the instrumentation could be coaxed into operating until she found a way to access the non-cooperative compsys.

"Your intimacy with her is a liability." Sela granted him her profile. "It colors your perception."

The sounds of his activity stopped. He grabbed the sides of her seat and swiveled it around so that she faced him.

"What's that supposed to mean? Are you preaching Decca to me?" he asked, frowning. "Now… of all times?"

"No, sir. Just… I believe that she may represent a threat." She gave a half-shrug. "One you're not prepared to acknowledge."

"What are you talking about?" He frowned. But there was something else there, just beneath the surface. Was it fear? "What did she say to you?"

Your sister brought something with her. Something insidious, darkly intelligent.

But that *did* sound mad. There was no real proof. Was there? Only instinct.

"How did she know to find us at Newet?" Sela countered, instead.

With that, Jon flinched. He looked down, swallowing. In a quiet, hurt voice, he answered: "She told me that she went there to die."

Sela watched him in silence, tempted to reach out and caress that dark head of hair and utter useless words of comfort, as she had watched him do for Erelah.

"Fates, Ty. The answers she gives make no sense. The madness that she speaks when she is awake…" He sat back, raking hands down his face. "She's not… right. That person you saw in the command loft, that's not her. We weren't raised to think that way. Words like 'breeder' were forbidden in our house."

"I've been called worse, sir."

"She acts as if she is … possessed." He sighed.

Sela bit her lip, guilty with vindication.

"It's my fault. Uncle made it plain that it was my duty to look after her. But I left her behind when the Regime came to Argos, looking for recruits. I think I did it just because Uncle forbade me to go."

His gazed turned to some tormented interior horizon. "I thought I was going to restore the Veradin Kindred honor. Become some great leader. I didn't understand a damned thing.

"Uncle disowned me, told me never to return. Told me that I would only bring Erelah grief if I tried to contact her. So I stayed away… for years. Then Uncle died. Next thing I know, I'm getting a trans from her. She's standing there looking so proud of herself in that damned Fleet uniform. Only a consultant but still. I yelled at her, told her how stupid she was. That was the last time I'd talked to her before … all of this."

"You didn't know this was going to happen, sir," Sela said, then winced. It sounded so useless.

"I'm sorry. For everything."

"You keep saying that, sir. Do you even know what you're apologizing for?"

"It's my fault that you're here. I got you wrapped up in something I don't even understand." He touched her face. "But you have to understand, no matter what happens… what comes next: I meant what I said to you in the command loft."

It's always been you.

He was waiting for her to say something in response. But what? Words clotted in her throat. How could he not read her mind as he always seemed to?

"I don't know what you want me to say." Inwardly she flinched at the tremble in her voice. That was not the way a soldier sounded. But this was an alien realm for her. Frightening in a completely unnamable way. "What do you want from me, sir?"

"No. Stop that. No more 'sir' or 'captain,'" he said with sudden forcefulness. "We trust each other, Sela. Right now. Or we're all dead."

"I trust you with my life."

"I've never doubted that." The sternness in his expression evaporated. "I pray to Miri that I truly deserve that from you."

"You do. Why wouldn't you?" she frowned, placing her hand over his.

He drew in breath as if to speak, but halted. Something like fear surfaced in his eyes.

"What is it?" she urged.

"Jon!" The hoarse screech crawled down from the crew quarters and into the bay.

Erelah. Of course.

Cursed with the same poor sense of timing as her sibling, it seemed.

"I should check on her." His hand dropped away. The moment folded back onto itself. "Continue your search of the stryker. Let me know what you find."

Sela watched him climb from the cockpit and head back up the stairs.

When Sela found him in the galley, Veradin—Jon—was sitting, shoulders hunched in one of the tortuously hard plastic benches bolted to the floor. Steam curled from an ignored cup of hot insta cal at his elbow. He wore an odd mix of a black close-fitting shirt and utilities. Sela could not recall ever seeing him in casual attire. Judging from the expression on his face, he looked far from relaxed.

Although his gaze was directed at the portal, she doubted he was watching the drift of stars in the blackness beyond. The Cass had been placed in a semi-

dormant mode to conserve on resources. A-grav remained on the only system at full, chiefly because only Sela had training to function in low or zero grav.

Neither of them was capable of coming up with a safe destination. Without a reliable nav charts, Jon had used his best guess on his knowledge of Fleet battlegroups in this sector. They were now on a course that presently drew them farther out into less populated regions, problematically further from reliable flex points.

"The stryker is a dead end," Sela announced. "Other than the fact that the stryker's chrono is six hours behind core standard, I got nowhere. The compsys locked me out after I triggered some sort of failsafe. Encrypted."

"And good morning to you too." He granted her a wry smile. The shadows beneath his eyes had worsened. "You didn't sleep. Did you?"

"I've slept enough, I think." Sela replied, taking the bench across the table from him.

"The only person that can make sense of the stryker is your sister." She gestured in the direction of Erelah's room.

Jon looked down at the counter top. "I don't know if that's going to happen." He shook his head grimly. "I think she's getting worse."

She slid a hand over the counter, her fingertips brushing his knuckles. His hand enfolded hers, flexing once, then retreated.

He glanced down at the tablet before her. "So what's this, then?"

"This can wait," she said, drawing the device back toward her. With the stryker search a dead end, she had elected to inventory their resources. The news was no more uplifting than her engagement with the mysterious vessel in their hold.

"No. Fates, no." He straightened. "I need to focus on something else. If just for a little while."

She sighed. "Not that this news is much better."

He shrugged. "Let's hear it, then."

"Sitrep." With that, she keyed open the manifest screen on the tablet. The basic pictographs of Regimental in tidy columns defined looming ruin. "Food for three days for consumption by two."

"Consumption by three." He corrected flatly. "You're not going without food."

"I don't need food the way—"

"Non-negotiable," he replied, sliding the mug of insta-cal toward her. "Just as bad as field rations. Enough to make you homesick for the *Storm King*."

She took a sip and slid the mug back to him, making a face. He had lied. This stuff was definitely worse.

"Next?"

"Water is better, but only if the filtration system holds."

"Fuel?"

"Have you thought of a destination?" She looked up eagerly.

He gave a grim shake of his head.

"One tank is dry, the other has three quarters."

The velo drives used for conduit travel did not have the same fuel demands as the Cesium-reliant engines the Cass utilized for sub-light propulsion in normal space. They would need to go sparingly on the hard burns if they would to make the existing supply last.

"Weapons?" he asked.

"There's my plasma rifle and your sidearm. Single exchange charges for both. My combat knife."

He sank back and leaned against the bulkhead. "What good is knowing any of this, if we don't even have a destination?"

That was the question. Wasn't it? It had followed them from chamber to chamber like a noisome ghost. Where to go? Where to hide when the Regime lived in every corner of the Known Worlds. Where was safe? And for how long?

They could not wander aimlessly forever. That course of action was just as dangerous as seeking out Origin. Eventually the remaining cesium tank would run dry. Sela needed some sort of directive. She craved orders, a mission to complete.

Since Erelah's arrival, there had been less speculation about the mysterious death warrant for Jon. Perhaps they had expected the girl to ramble out a suitable explanation. But as the days passed, it seemed less likely. Erelah was basically adrift as well, locked inside a hellish universe of her own. Even if Jon did not say it, his sister needed better medical attention than they could provide. The girl needed psych help. To Sela, it was the equivalent of seeking out a mystic.

"The Reaches," he said.

Sela was about to laugh, but stopped when she saw he was serious.

"The Reaches are uncharted… lawless."

"That's why they're called the Reaches."

Well over a century ago following the War of the Three Armies, the Sceeloid and First signed the Treaty of Ashes. It defined the Reaches as neutral territory. This was easily done as it was not desired by either party considering the heavy

damage inflicted on the region by the wars. Although the science behind it was complex, Sela understood enough to know that the sub-space weapons that First employed had destabilized conduit travel there, leaving very few functioning flex points. As a consequence dozens of colonized Eugenes worlds were cut off by the vast distance from Origin. They were left to fend for themselves in the region.

Stories persisted that some of those abandoned worlds thrived on. Lawlessness prevailed. Non-reg species ran rampant. Even the more insane mercs refused to pursue bounties into the region. And now her captain wanted to go there.

"You're serious." Sela sighed.

"You have a better idea?"

After a long, thoughtful pause, Sela shook her head. "There's no basic nav on this boat to even get us there. And once we get there, how do we even get around? Most of the flex points were lost."

"There *have* to be charts," he said. "How else do the bastards that live there get around? Question is: where do we go to find them?"

She drew in breath to speak, reconsidered.

But he caught it. Jon canted his head, a smirk growing as he watched her. It was the same expression he wore when he was game for a plan of action that was particularly insane. It was the type of plan from which she could usually dissuade him. Usually.

But this time it was her turn at insanity.

"You've an idea. Don't you?" He leaned across the table.

"I found a location called Merx on the ship's navsys. Pretty sure it's a ghost station since it has no match on newer Regime charts. Unregulated commerce outpost right off an old flexpoint. Looks like it used to be a fuel stop."

"And?"

"And," she continued, "We have a cargo hold full of non-reg pharms. We could trade that for everything we need... including charts."

"How do you know they'll have what we want?"

"During my duty rotation with Commerce Enforcement, I raided similar places. A great deal of black market goods move through there. People. Goods. Information. It's our best chance. It's another way to gain intel on the Regime."

Jon turned his attention to the hallway. He was listening for Erelah. Apparently satisfied, he turned back to Sela. "What about the ship's ident? Can you disable it?"

"No. Not disable. That's the first thing CE agents look for. Cass drive signatures have built in idents. Sector drones are programmed to auto detect non-tagged drive signatures. But the Cass's previous occupants made a hack a long time ago."

Sela swapped the display on the handheld and slid it across the table to him. The ship was now broadcasting the ident of a plague colony transport. She could easily change it to a medical waste ship. The other signatures were even less attractive as potential targets to pirates or other marauders. But it was essential that they mimicked the speed and maneuvering of those fraudulent idents to be convincing.

"This might work." His smile broadened.

"Of course it will work, sir. I thought of it." Sela smirked.

She felt that familiar warmth spread under the glow of his approval. Momentarily the strange tension from yesterday thinned and things felt normal. They were planning a mission. There was a clear objective. This was how the universe was meant to work.

"I don't anticipate a Regime presence on Merx. However, it would be best for you to remain onship with Erelah as I conduct the trade," Sela said quickly. "I can blend in… be inconspicuous."

At this Veradin started chuckling.

"What?" She frowned.

"You. Inconspicuous?" he snorted. "They'll see you coming. You might as well be wearing a sign."

She folded her arms, eyes narrowed.

"Ty, you're not going into a hostile location alone." His shoulders made a stubborn line. "Besides… have you ever *bought* anything in your life?"

As a soldier of the Regime, everything she had ever required was provided to her. Even during the rare occasions of shore leave, Citizens were required to provide resources gratis to any soldier as tribute. Negotiation was not part of a typical exchange.

"No," she finally confessed, then added defensively, "How difficult could it be?"

"We go together or not at all. I handle the talking."

"Sir…" she began. He raised an eyebrow at her. "*Jon*, Erelah should not be onship alone. Her behavior has been… unpredictable at best."

Veradin opened his mouth, argument at the ready, but stopped. He looked down, his fingers digging into the edges of the battered tabletop.

"Perhaps there is someone at Merx that could help her," Sela said in a half-lie, not wanting to offer hope that would be disappointed. Any medicos they would find at a ghost station were hacks and charlatans, better suited at illegal augmentations and patching up plasma-weapon wounds.

"Merx, then." He straightened and folded his arms. "The question remains: what to do with Erelah?"

"I have an idea. But you're not going to like it."

19

"No! I don't want it!" Erelah backed away from Jon, her heart thumping.

"It's for your own good."

Her brother stalked closer with his hands outstretched. He approached her the way they would the wild scythe cats as children on Argos. They would try to capture the little kits with the erroneous dream they could bring one home and keep it as a pet.

"I don't want it!" Erelah shrieked, not unlike a scythe cat.

She cowered until her back struck the wall and even then she tried to meld with it further.

"Jon, please no. Don't."

She was as fearful of touching him as she was of the jector in his hand. In her time with Tristic, there had been too many drugs. Some that made her sleep, some that kept her awake for days on end. This place was supposed to be free of that. Safe.

"Baby sister, please," he crooned. "It's to help you sleep."

"I don't want to sleep." Erelah jabbed a finger at her temple. "She's in there when I sleep."

But Jon would not understand, would he? He couldn't.

"It's for your own good, Erelah." He sounded so much like Uncle.

Neither, in the end, really knew what was good for us.

"You don't know," she sobbed.

Stone-faced, Tyron folded her arms and watched them. Her voice was as flat as her stare: "I'll do it, sir."

"Stay out of this," Jon barked.

Erelah took this momentary distraction and bolted for the doorway. It was a miserable attempt done with weak arms, weak legs.

Suddenly her feet were swept from beneath her. Her back hit the deck with a painful smack. Firm hands pressed her down. Tyron peered down at her. Erelah felt a sting in her shoulder. A wave of warmth grew rapidly, invading her spine and finally pooling over her scalp.

The familiar waiting darkness came with it.

Erelah's eyes shut under sudden heaviness and the sounds of their warring voices were the last to fade:

Damnit sela isaidiwoulddoit…

Itsdonenow…itsover.

Sela wriggled uncomfortably in the single suit, hating the way it fit. It hugged her frame in all the wrong places. She longed for the baggy, heavy material of her utilities, but Jon pointed out the folly of wearing them. Of course, he was right, but it did not help subdue the pang of loss in knowing that she could never wear them again.

Jon nudged her. "Problems?"

"These clothes. I feel… naked."

The corners of his mouth curled. She felt the fleeting urge to smack him.

"I doubt full ground engagement gear is fashionable in a place like this. It might make you a bit conspicuous." He was dressed in the civilian clothes Sela had haphazardly stuffed into his duty kit before they fled the *Storm King*. It was odd seeing him like that.

"I'll manage."

She renewed her frown at the crowded corridor.

The space was filled with lights and placards advertising everything and in every possible combination. The effect was jarring and more than a little unnerving. There was no order here. Occasionally the noise from the crowded taverns rolled out to them: laughter, raucous shouts and jangled music. Smells mingled on the recycled air, despite the filters. The aromas of cooking food masked the danker, heavier odors of the badly-maintained hygiene of a few thousand beings.

What passed for a dock agent had warned them leave to their higher yield side arms onboard the Cass. The station had an automated weapons surge trigger, he explained, to protect against breaches. But Sela was not searched. Perhaps it had

to do with the staggering glare she fixed on the agent when he suggested it. His partner, a shriveled Onari clansman, had been in the obvious throes of a hangover and seemed content to stare at the rusted scales of the floor plating, a long line of drool trailing from his mouth. Sela seriously doubted they would have noticed even if she wore full turnout gear.

Amateurs.

Without breaking stride, she affected a stretch and quickly switched her knife from the makeshift holster between her shoulder blades to her jacket sleeve. It offered better access to the weapon.

Merx had apparently begun its life as a refueling station, back in the days of dependence on cesium fuel tech. It had been an essential point for long haulers looking to refuel. When cesium fell out of favor, the station was lost to memory. Its position no longer offered strategic advantage, so both the Regime and the Sceeloid chose to ignore it. As with any overlooked corners, people and things that did not want to be found collected there. And, to Sela it seemed, a great many souls preferred to remain lost.

The quarters were close. Having lived on carriers and stations among nameless thousands for nearly her entire life, Sela was accustomed to a lack of space. But never before with such discord. There was no control to it. It was a tormenting chaos of pedestrian traffic that obeyed no rules. Trelgin. Onari. Binait. Eugenes. All of them were going everywhere at once.

Sela caught the appraising stare of a Eugenes male and scowled. He looked away and quickened his pace through the throng, not unlike the tech on the *Storm King*. She hated the clothes she had to wear, hated the crowd's raucous disorder, and hated their very smell. The dusty heat of Tasemar was bliss in comparison.

As they made their way past a skinshop, a rail-thin Binait female, hideously young, called out to Jon.

"Come play with me, handsome. Bring your mate to watch."

He pulled Sela along before she could yell anything back at the little vulta.

How had this been my idea?

"Stop scowling," Jon said.

"I'm not scowling. I'm watching. You'll *know* when I'm scowling."

He drew her into a chummy embrace, one arm thrown over her shoulders. He buried his face against her neck.

"What—"

"This is the place. Behind me." They had stopped in front of a tavern. The bleary-eyed security guard had given them the name of a merchant of nav charts, Phex. This was apparently his establishment.

"Listen to me." Jon's voice was low and had the strange ability to play along the lower portions of her spine in a pleasant way. To the crowd, he was a lover, intimating a secret. But his words were far from loving. "We're outnumbered. If it goes skew, get back to the Cass. Like we talked about. No last stands here."

She scanned the doorway. It was another drinking establishment like the handful they had already passed. Glowing signs offered intoxicants and gaming. Drunken patrons lounged about the exterior.

"Stop looking at the crowd," he said tersely. "Look down. Act like you're enjoying this."

That was really not that difficult. Sela ducked her head. "Understood, sir."

Sir. The word had slipped out. She winced at his measuring silence.

"Stop." He tilted her chin up with his fingertips. "Stop calling me that. You do that in this place and we're both dead. This place hates Regime. If they know about the warrants, we're both nothing more than a meal ticket."

He pulled back, the warm press of his body now gone. She swayed slightly at the abruptness of his withdrawal. Her ears burned. She swallowed, peering owlishly about. It was as if the colors in the passage had changed, becoming overexposed and garish.

Why was everything so hellishly loud?

"Be nice," Jon said. His hand entwined with Sela's as he guided them to the doorway to the tavern. "And smile."

Sela pulled a too-wide plastic grin across her face. "I'm always nice, damn it."

With one last hitch at the damned single suit, she squared her shoulders and slipped into the dark and noisy interior.

Quiet. Too quiet.

The lights overhead hummed with eye-watering brilliance. On disjointed legs, Erelah eased herself from the cot. She had no memory of waking. Her head felt thick. Her tongue was swollen against the roof of her mouth. A cloying metallic taste invaded her throat. The buoyant sensation was familiar, but weak.

Something was off, missing. But what?

Then she realized. The uneven vibration of the Cassandra's engines were absent. Testing her balance, Erelah teetered to the middle of the room.

Could we be docked?

But where?

Charts. They'd been talking about nav charts.

Then she remembered why the flat ugly taste in her mouth was so familiar. Tyron had given her something to make her sleep. But why? She was too groggy to fully embrace the tremor of betrayal that came with that thought.

Cautiously, Erelah made her way to the door and pressed her ear to its surface. A low-level hum seemed to come from very far away, punctuated by the periodic hollow clank of metal on metal.

She tabbed the lock. It clicked twice in rapid succession but stayed closed. Erelah tried it again, a little more desperately.

Nothing.

"Jon?" Her voice seemed too loud against the uncommon quiet. "Jon… please."

Then, after long contemplation, she ventured: "Commander Tyron?"

No one answered.

Wakefulness returned to Erelah in stages, and with it, something else. It uncoiled from the burrowed-out hollow in her brain.

/They've abandoned you, Veradin./

She recoiled and pressed her forearms against her ears. It did nothing to block out Tristic.

"Not there. Not there. Not there," she chanted.

/Oh, but I am. I am here, lovely child. For you. I am waiting./

"Jon. Where are you?" She did not bother to raise her voice above a whisper. He would not hear.

/Abandoned. You have been left. But I want you still./

Tristic seeped into her, impossible to fend off. She faded under the monster's overpowering tide. The last thing that registered was a guilty sense of relief.

Slowly, Erelah's body uncurled. She stood with an erectness that denied any previous sense of fatigue or pain. Then, with stilted careful steps she turned back to the door.

The locking interface was a simple electronic device, a mere privacy lock.

/Another delay. More tedium. More annoyance./

/There would be specific pleasure in eradicating the brother and his breeder./

Carefully Erelah's fingers picked at the metal frame that hid the locking mechanism's circuits. Soon her fingertips were bloody as the bare metal sliced into the skin.

Erelah was not there to feel the pain.

20

"You're a tall one, aren't you?"

The expectant silence that followed made Sela realize the comment had been directed at her. She glanced at her captain. He bore a strange amused expression, despite the tense circumstances. At least someone was enjoying this.

The comment had come from Phex, a squat yellow slab of a Rhobgic seated at the table across from them. She was especially mistrustful of their kind. Their biology was the symbiotic pairing of what amounted to an intelligent fungus growing over and invading a host animal frame. More parasitic than anything. Little wonder they were branded non-regs. They dwelled in the dark and squalid environs of the Known Worlds. Judging by what she had experienced of Merx so far, Phex had found an ideal home.

"I get that a lot," Sela said quickly, before looking away. In truth, she had been designed to grow specifically to her present height with the bone density and muscle mass to match. She doubted Phex would have been interested in that fact.

Sela was scanning the crowd. She was hyped, on edge. The number of people here made her nervous. The tavern was a heavily fortified establishment with one point of entry. She counted four visible security personnel. Two additional, she suspected, were disguised as patrons. And in all probability Phex bore a concealed weapon. She and Jon were at a disadvantage here.

"Good looking female." Phex smiled, displaying teeth unacquainted with hygiene. "How much?"

Although the question was directed at her captain, it was meant for Sela to overhear.

"No one buys me," Sela growled. *Now* the little bastard had her attention.

Jon canted his head. The expression in his eyes was a silent command.

Play along. Like we planned.

"Not for sale." He pulled her into a possessive embrace. She complied stiffly, all the while glaring at the tavern-keeper.

"No such thing as *not for sale* here, friend." Phex's grin flattened for a moment. "Everyone knows that."

"Of course," Jon responded in Commonspeak. His Eugenes accent was flatter, practically undetectable. "But the reason I'm here is to make a *purchase*, friend."

"What kind?" Phex squinted, his flabby jowls jiggling with delight. Sela was temporarily forgotten.

"Nav charts. Compatible with a Cassandra interface."

"Bit of an antique, eh? What're you offerin' to trade?"

"Pharms. Quality product."

"I might have… something." His Stygian eyes rolled up and to the left in a pantomimed search for memory. "What system?"

Sela wondered if anyone really bought this act. Phex may have looked like a pile of doughy, rancid wax, but beneath that was a razor-sharp swindler. Dangerous, even.

Jon leaned over the table. "Not a system… a region. The Reaches."

Phex rocked back in his chair and waved a hand. "What in Fate's name would you want with the Reaches?" It was obvious he did not pick up on their desire for subtlety.

"That's not really important, is it?"

"Important enough to want charts to it."

The trader leaned forward. His thick-fingered hands rustled around in a bowl of joolid crisps and made them disappear into his maw.

"Perhaps he doesn't have what we need." Sela said, repeating the memorized phrase, just as Jon had coached her back on the Cass. That was the way these types negotiated, he had explained. To Sela it felt ridiculous, inefficient, but she trusted her captain's insights.

Jon made an exaggerated shrug and started to stand.

"Drink! You're dry. Where are my manners? Let's talk over a drink," Phex erupted with a hollow chuckle.

He brushed crumbs from the table and pounded on its surface with a fist. A stoop-shouldered server appeared.

"Drinks for my new friends here!"

Jon glanced at Sela. He bore the same deadpan expression she had seen before every deployment, but she knew that underneath, he was all nerves. Yet so far, things were unfolding as he had predicted.

Moments later, the server was back. Phex took his drink and gulped its contents in one well-practiced motion. Jon reached for his tumbler, but Sela intercepted. She studied its contents, sniffed. Then, tentatively took a sip. Her gaze never left Phex the entire time.

"Yannish brew. Cheap stuff." Satisfied, she placed it back before her captain with a curt nod and pulled a plastic smile at Phex that made her earlier scowl look inviting.

His expression darkened. "Breeder, right?" Phex's pretense of the congenial merchant dissolved.

"That make a difference?" Jon asked, dropping his hand to trap Sela's against the arm of the chair.

"Always can tell one. Got a look about 'em. 'Specially this one," Phex replied. He turned his sneer from Sela to Jon. "What'd you do… get caught giving it to her in the officer's lounge? Easy to see that temptation."

"It's complicated." Jon reached for his mug. His other hand firmly anchored Sela's arm in place.

My captain is saving your life right now, parasite. Sela chewed the inside of her mouth.

Phex rumbled on. "Trained killers from the day they're born. No such thing as a tame breeder, I says. Can't trust 'em. I'll deal with *you*. Not her. No dealing with breeders."

Jon regarded their host for a measuring moment across the table.

He wasn't going to do this? Was he?

Perhaps sensing Jon's hesitation, Phex adopted the chummy salesman tone once more. "My man at the docks no doubt told you, I'm the only one here that deals with newcomers. Not as if you got much choice in the matter. Now I got the maps you need. You have decent goods that I can move, we go talk."

"I'll find you when we're done here." Jon released his grip on her but kept his stare on Phex.

"Let us discuss this in a more private setting, friend." Phex's smile reappeared, victorious. He gestured to a doorway shrouded with remains of a stained tapestry at the back of the tavern.

Sela eyed Phex with infinite distrust. Her captain rose, ready to follow. She stood.

"Your… retainer can help herself to my tavern's amusements," Phex said over his shoulder. "If she's even capable of such."

Jon shot her a warning expression.

Sela nodded, squelched.

Separating was a gamble. They would be out of contact with each other; the Cass had no functional vox devices onboard. This had better be worth it.

Jon suddenly pulled her into an embrace. Before she could react, he was kissing her.

"Remember… low profile," he said in a rushed whisper against her neck. He stepped back, tapping her under the chin. "And…uh… try not to kill anyone."

And just as quickly he turned to follow Phex.

"A beauty like you shouldn't be alone."

Sela sighed heavily and looked at the man who had sidled up to her as she stood against the far wall of Phex's tavern.

Moments before, she had watched him weave through the crowd, obviously trying not to be obvious in his approach. She was reluctant to leave her position. It offered an unobstructed view of both the exit and the doorway to Phex's lounge.

Where this Eugenes was as wide and tall as Valen, any similarity stopped there. He appeared older by a decade. His eyes carried an open lust that provoked a primitive loathing in her. It reminded her of her days as a booter, before the males figured out she would neuter them for even looking at her like that.

This misstep did not have the benefit of that education.

He planted a thick arm against the doorway over her shoulder, eclipsing everything.

"Buy you a drink, pretty?" he leered in Commonspeak.

Sela looked him up and down. His features were brutish and thick. Tattoos dominated the left side of his face, competing with thick layer of scars at his chin. Silver lined his front incisors in what was, she guessed, the fashion among the dispossessed. He smelled of the same dank shadows of this place.

"You don't want any trouble," she warned through clenched teeth. "Move on."

"Maybe I like trouble."

Sela was about to reply, but stopped when she saw the dim glint of metal within the shadow of his coat. It was the evident outline of an A6 compression pistol, a fairly new Regime issue.

She looked down at the weapon and up at him.

No way a scav like this could possess such a weapon. The A6 pistols were hard coded and could be fired only by the user who had the matching implanted tracer. Expensive tech.

At her expression, his silver smile evaporated.

He grabbed for his weapon. She seized his wrist. He got it as far as shoulder height. Sela threw her weight against his arm and kicked away from the wall. On reflex, his grip tightened, finger jerked against the trigger. The round struck the floor near the toe of his boot. The report was punishing in the small alcove. Sela threw the point of an elbow into his thick neck. The gun clattered from his grip.

Even if he knew she was a deserter, Sela realized she looked like an easy target. Her appearance had often garnered her an unwanted type of attention. Men like this one were always surprised when she turned out to be the opposite. And she had come to rely on that.

There was a smattering of screams and a few shouts. Over the ringing in her ears caused by the close report of the A6, she heard a throaty metallic blatting. An automated announcement, in an oddly calm pitch of Commonspeak, competed with the din:

"Your attention please. Weapon discharge detected. Level four. Section twelve. Lockdown initiated. Thank you for your cooperation."

The damned energy weapon alert. It seemed the dock agents hadn't lied.

"Damn it all," Sela grunted moving in time to block his retaliatory strike. She squeezed out of the alcove. No longer boxed in, she reached for the knife in her sleeve just as he grabbed a fistful of her hair.

She threw her weight to her left and swung her right arm over his. His balance teetered. She drove a palm strike into his nose and felt a fleshy snap.

"Breeder bitch!" he spouted with a plume of blood and spittle.

She squared off to face him, knife slipping into her hand.

Around them, the tavern had dissolved into chaos.

21

"Your attention please. Weapon discharge detected. Level four. Section twelve. Lockdown initiated. Thank you for your cooperation."

"Lockdown. Got it," Sela panted, scowling down at the still figure on the floor. Her knuckles throbbed. Her injured shoulder ached. She was fairly certain she had bruised ribs, but this was invigorating. It hardly felt fair to her would-be assailant. She tapped his side with her boot. Her knife was buried between his ribs yet he still managed a low grunt.

The tavern was empty, populated only by overturned benches and abandoned drinks.

She knelt on to his chest, robbing him of leverage although it was highly unlikely he would ever get back up. His hand weakly gripped her upper arm. She shifted her weight and crushed his hand to the deck beneath her boot.

"Way too grabby for a dead man."

Sela ripped open the front of his artfully careworn jacket to expose a neat black tunic and trousers devoid of Regimental insignia. As she suspected, he was a Seeker, a well-trained fugitive hunter. They worked alone. Because one was often enough.

She looked around for the displaced A6. It had become wedged beneath an overturned bench. The thing was brand new too. A Seeker with all-new Regime tech. For a moment she didn't know whether to be worried or flattered.

The knife came out more easily than it had gone in. He barely moved when she sliced open his forearm and dug his tracer out. The A6 would be useless without it.

"I can't leave you alone for a moment, can I?"

"Captain." She gaped up at Jon.

"What happened to low profile?" He pulled her up by the elbow.

"Seeker. There could be more Regime."

"Definitely more," he said grimly, his attention swiveling to the front of the tavern. Sela turned.

A sudden rush of panicked screams flooded the marketplace outside. She saw the gleam of EE trooper helmets in the garish glow of the tavern's multicolored sign.

"This way." Jon steered her in the direction of Phex's private office. Sela paused long enough to scoop up the A6 from the floor.

Inside, they leaned against the heavy metal door and cycled the lock closed. She took in the smaller room: incongruously tidy with some nice-looking appointments. But no Phex.

"Where's the slug?" she asked.

Veradin shoved the table onto its side to reveal the open mouth of a trap door in the floor.

"It's like he knew we were coming. I was about to grab him when the weapons alarm sounded. Figured you had something to do with that."

"The other guy started it." Sela looked away guiltily.

A coordinated barrage shook the office door's frame. The troopers had arrived. Sela sat on the edge of the opening, feet dangling into the space. Yellow chem lights offered weak illumination below. They exchanged a look across Phex's secret passage.

"Looks like maintenance access." As she leaned down her voice echoed back from the dimness.

"Ty, wait!" Jon barked.

Without hesitation, she pushed away from the edge and slipped down into the passage. Jon followed, colliding with her as he landed. The space was tight. The passage only allowed them to stand at an awkward stoop. Moving about would have been easier for the oddly shaped little Phex.

A crash echoed in the room above. The EE troopers had gotten through the office door.

"They're wearing full turnout gear. Can't fit down here," she said. "But that won't keep them long, sir."

"Let's move then." Jon forced his way past her.

They managed a scurrying stooped run. Around a curve, the conduit emptied into a tiny square room that was blessedly tall enough to allow them to stand.

There was a distinct clatter behind her in the shaft. Sela did not give Jon enough time to pause.

"Down!" She shoved him behind the bulkhead and covered him with her body.

There was a blue-white pop and a wave of vertigo knocked both of them to their knees. Ears ringing, she climbed back to her feet. They had been clipped by the wave of the pulse. Not enough to render them unconscious, but enough to disorient. Just because the troopers couldn't fit did not mean they would give up. The grenade had been their solution.

Sela would have done the same.

"Sir! Are you injured?" she yelled over the ringing in her ears.

Hands on knees, Jon doubled over. He nodded, holding up a staying hand.

"Concussion grenade?" he wheezed. Then he puked.

Sela shrank back. *What a booter.*

"Back in the kennels, one of the drillers used to throw them into the middle of the mess hall at random."

"Charming." He wiped his mouth with his jacket sleeve. "You and I had vastly different childhoods."

Sela looked around. Three corridors led off of the room, each in a different direction...

"Which way?" she asked.

"We have to get back to the ship."

"But the nav charts." Sela stepped to doorway at her right. Phex couldn't be that far ahead. They could still complete their objective and elude capture.

"No. I mean now," he called with renewed urgency.

Sela turned. He was peering down at the handheld interface she had linked up with the Cass. A new alert pinged on its screen.

"On-board motion detector is active. She's attempting to open the outer hatch."

She cursed. The kid had enough tranq in her to knock me out for a week. "How?"

"Does it matter? We have to go."

"Then which way?"

"Here." Veradin lunged for the left passage.

Her arm shot out, barring him. "No!"

Sela stooped, gesturing to what she had just noticed. "Trip wire."

Delicately, she traced the slender silver wire up and around the frame. Flat packets of thermaline lined the space in neat rows. A fine layer of dust coated the floor of the passage, undisturbed. No one had been that way in quite some time.

"Explosive. Low yield. Meant to injure," Sela explained.

"Phex doesn't trust himself, it seems," Veradin said, scanning the center passage. Well-lit, it canted up and to the right, suggesting it led to the upper levels.

"Narrows the choices then." Sela turned back to the passage on her right. Unlit by chem lights, it was impossible to see beyond the first few paces.

"This way," they said in unison, both gesturing in different directions.

"Ty—"

"That's the way he wants us to go, sir." She jerked her thumb at the center corridor.

"It's in the direction of the docking bays. It's faster."

"No doubt. But not that way."

He took two purposeful strides into the space before she could stop him.

The metal gate slid shut quickly. Had he hesitated, Jon would have been sliced in two.

"What did I just say?" She scolded through the bars. A hectic bout of pulling and pushing at the barricade revealed what she already feared. The thing would not budge. "I told you—"

His hand shot up. "Not another word!"

With a snarl, Sela kicked the gate. With growing desperation, she searched its edges. There was no release on her side.

Veradin examined the interior and turned back to her. "There's no getting this open. I'll have to take the passage the rest of the way."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Get to the Cass. If you get there first, secure Erelah. Get out of here."

Sela did not answer.

"That's an order."

"You can't do that. You can't give me orders anymore."

"Ty. Look at me." He waited for her to look at him. She stepped closer, curling her fingers through the mesh of the gate to fold against his hand.

"You know I'm right." He held her gaze. "You can't fight them all off."

He was right. Of course, he was right. But it did not stop the hollow blossom of fear. To die here, like this, would mean nothing. There was a distant hope that they could still emerge from this intact.

She shut her eyes, releasing a low sigh. "Fine."

Erelah should pray that he beats me back to the ship. Somehow, this was her fault. Had to be.

22

Phex was surprisingly fast for his stature and build. But then his speed was probably also motivated by an intense desire to evade capture.

She caught up with him nearing an access corridor. When he saw her, he launched into a wobbling sprint. The passage widened out into what appeared to be a storage facility for spent fuel casings. The walls were emblazoned with poison and rad warnings with, thankfully, no sign of the former contents.

If I one day grow a third arm, I'll hunt down Phex and pummel him with that too.

He was mere strides ahead now. She could hear his winded breathing as he crossed the room to a door. As he threw it open, the brilliance of a marketplace corridor pierced the gloom. With it came the full-on bray of the warning klaxon, accompanied by frightened shouts of Merx's fleeing residents.

Sela lunged, wrapping Phex in a tackle. She pulled him back inside and shut the door. The tavern keeper spun around, arms flailing. She pressed a boot into his pendulous yellow abdomen. He swung the sawed-off scatter gun in a ponderous arc, with no real force or ability to aim. Just as he pulled the trigger, she batted the muzzle aside. The round in the space was concussive.

"May I?" Sela snatched away the gun.

Phex grunted, still pinned beneath her foot.

"I'll take that as a yes." She twisted the weapon from his grip and propped its barrel against his neck.

Sela spared a moment to shake her head. The ringing in her left ear drowned out all sound on that side. Through the vibration of the deck, she could still feel the panicked footfalls of the station dwellers in the corridors beyond.

With her free hand she rummaged his food-stained coat. In a hidden pocket was a tiny dat drive, no larger than a child's finger. It was important enough for Phex to keep it on his disgusting person.

"Is this what I think it is?" She jammed the device into his face. "The nav charts on this?"

His mouth flopped wordlessly.

"Well?" She pressed the primer on the rifle.

He nodded, jowls wiggling. "Only copy. They confiscated the rest."

"Too bad," Sela mocked with a pout, and jammed the dat file into the pouch on her thigh.

"Breeder bitch," he grumbled.

"Can't trust us. Remember?" Sela straightened, her aim trained on Phex. "Bay four. Fastest way there."

"This level. Second corridor past the market."

"When did the Regime get here?"

"Half a sol," he grunted, rolling from side to side in an attempt to get to his feet. "They sent Seekers to cull the map dealers."

Something more than fear of being blown away by his own weapon paraded behind his beady-eyed gaze.

"Go on." Sela prodded the end of the rifle into this thick belly, throwing him off balance again.

"Big payoff for whoever helped catch you."

"From Ravstar?" she scoffed. "They don't pay. They take what they want."

"Not if they wants things quiet, see?" He licked his lips.

"Why do they want us?"

When he took too long to answer, she prodded him again with the muzzle. He squealed.

"Not you. They were looking for someone named Veradin. And it ain't in my conjuring as to the why." Phex snorted, clearly amused.

"Something funny?"

"You're just *byproduct*, pet."

"But *they're* Kindred."

"You say that like it makes a difference. It don't none. Not to the likes of *her*."

"Her? Who's that?"

Phex said nothing. His eyes rolled up, looking over her shoulder.

Sela realized her mistake too late. Her hearing, temporarily deafened by the sawed-off's blast on one side, had not detected an approach. Whirling, she caught

the brunt of the trooper's rifle in her injured shoulder. Her grip on the sawed-off failed.

She charged, hoping to push the trooper back and make room in the small space to slip past. His armor would have made hand-to-hand foolish on her part, but he could not move as quickly under its burdensome weight. Her best chance was to make space and slip by.

But that was not how things happened.

Just as she reached for the A6, staggering pain raced down both hamstrings. A second trooper got her with a stunner. She staggered forward to meet the stock of the first trooper's weapon under her chin. The A6 clattered to the deck. Orbs of light dazzled her vision as she crashed down beside Phex. An armored knee landed squarely between her shoulder blades and the air rushed from her lungs in a wounded bellow. A hand on the back of her head rammed her cheekbone into the deck. She watched as a boot stepped into her field of vision. Sela stared at its glossy surface. Straining, she turned her gaze up to its owner, then regretted it.

Over her loomed a misshapen freak of pallid, scaled skin dressed as a Defensor. Metallic stitching at the high collar depicted the Ravstar emblem. Although its face was partially obscured by the heavy hood, Sela caught enough details to help her realize what she was looking at. A Sceeloid half-breed.

"Commander Tyron. How terribly disappointing you are in the flesh," it said.

The Defensor's hand tightened around her throat. Sela heard and felt something pop. A zinging sensation ran along her shoulders and into her fingers. She clawed at the closing fist. With incredible strength, the half-breed lifted Sela up and thrust her back against the wall.

She found herself unable to tear her gaze from the Defensor's. Despite the strange mongrel appearance, the eyes on this thing were the worst. They were purely Eugenes and the perfect shade of dark brown.

"Erelah Veradin." The voice had an odd metallic edge.

"Never... heard of ... her."

The fist squeezed in response. Beyond the pain, Sela realized with relief: the captain was most likely still free. It emboldened her.

"I know she accompanied you to this station. Where is she?"

"No idea." She grunted. Her lungs were burning wings trapped in her chest.

"She is here. I can feel her. Very close." The Defensor's eyelids fluttered. Its cruel mouth curved into something like a smile.

"You'd make a cute couple."

Sela's comment seemed to bring her back from some little mental trip.

"Erelah utilized a stryker to depart my facility. Where is it?"

"Up his ass." She flicked her gaze at the tense bundle of nerves standing at the half-breed's elbow, a slender, pinch-faced man. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you look."

The freak's grip tightened. Dots swirled before Sela's eyes. She could barely hear its voice over the blood roaring in her ears.

"Give her to me. You and your captain may go free. The warrants against you will be rescinded. You can even return to being a soldier, Tyron. Is that that not what you want? You need not lose your rank over this. You were mortally wounded when Veradin dragged you onto the vessel. The Information Officer's testimony confirms it. Certainly, you would have not made a deliberate choice to go with him. Why should you suffer for Veradin's lapse?"

I suffer.

Her thoughts swam like her vision. This freak knew so much.

"You can have it all back. You have my word. In return, I want Erelah Veradin."

The Defensor's grip slackened, and cooling oxygen raced into Sela's scorched throat.

"You say you can do all these things. That you have all this power. Why not just take this whole station, find her yourself?" she croaked.

"Ah. There is the keen intellect of a survivor." The Defensor smiled briefly.

Ravstar must have beaten the Cassandra to Merx. It had been much more than a good guess, or carefully honed strategy. Their intel had been enough to spur this half-breed and her team to arrive here in person. There was something very wrong, despite the Defensor's deliberate tone. Something deeper. She wanted things *quiet*, according to Phex —wherever the duplicitous little slug had scampered.

If this *thing* truly had the backing of First, the station would be an orbiting cinder. Only four EEs had pursued them into Phex's private lounge. And only two remained with the Defensor. To Sela it felt like far too few boots on the ground to take a facility of this size. It seemed reckless, desperate.

"First doesn't know you're here," Sela said. "This is a rogue op. Who are you?"

The freak canted her head in an unnatural manner, looking like a raptor sizing up a meal.

"I can see why Trinculo considered you a danger, Tyron. It's a pity to waste such a brain on a lowly breeder like you. Perhaps Veradin likes the sense of power he has over you… his clever and loyal breeder pet."

Erelah's words were coming out of the face of this monstrosity.

"You're not fit to speak his name."

But she had sensed Sela pause.

"Oh? And what do you know about your worshiped captain, pet?"

Her oddly Eugenes eyes studied her, somehow able to read the very pattern of blood flowing through Sela's body. A strange prickling sensation flowed down the back of her neck like a rush of heat.

"If you knew the truth about him… about his sister… would you be so swift to defend him?"

"Like I'm going to believe a word out of your ugly head."

"Defensor Tristic… ma'am. There is a problem." The thin man interrupted. One hand pressed against his head, listening to the ear piece of his vox device.

The hand on her throat slackened more. Sela made her move, drawing both feet up, countering the grip. She launched, pushing off from the wall. Just then, her captor side-stepped, releasing her throat.

Sela misjudged the distance to the floor and her knees folded. She levered up on hands and knees, gulping in air. A trooper was instantly upon her, planting the muzzle of his rifle against her temple. She was more than content to stay there and breathe at the moment. She needed to think.

The thin man pressed closed to his master. His voice was frantic and hushed. "Ma'am, we cannot possibly maintain our location and continue the search." Tristic. So that was this bitch's name.

"Maynard, it is not a question of insufficient resources, but of insufficiency in your leadership." Tristic snarled.

"We have only cleared half of the docking bays." He replied. "If the renegade ship has a masked ident, as you've described, my men will need to conduct a visual search of each docking tier."

"Erelah is here." The hybrid's voice became a meaty growl. "Even now I share Sight with her despite her resistance."

With this she swayed slightly on her feet. A gloved hand moved to her temple. Her voice was slower, thicker when she spoke again. "Continue the search for their ship. She is still there."

"I need more men. If you recall the *Questic*—"

With a savage growl, Tristic turned on Maynard. In one quick motion, she shoved the officer bodily toward the corridor, where he fell sprawling. He climbed to his feet, cringing as if in preparation for another attack.

Tristic loomed over him. But her voice was calm and glossy once more, as if the attack had never happened. "Maynard, you will accomplish what I have asked."

The freak's head was turned. She had dismissed Sela for the moment.

There. The sawed-off lay forgotten near the wall. The A6 was a glinting impossibility too far to reach. The two troopers were more interested in watching the hybrid threaten Maynard. Sela dove at the weapon and drew aim on Tristic's back.

The blast roared. The impact struck the space between the uneven lines of Tristic's shoulder blades. She pitched forward slightly as if she had just been jostled in a busy corridor, nothing more.

Body armor. The crazy bitch had on body armor.

Wide-eyed, she stared. A trooper ripped the weapon from her and she was hauled to her feet. Her arms were braced painfully behind her back.

Tristic turned with an amused expression pulling across that cyanotic crag of a mouth. She applauded slowly.

"Stalwart to the last, Tyron. Your defection is such a loss."

"Thanks," Sela muttered, spitting blood onto the deck. One of the EE troopers pinioned her arms behind her and restraints bit into her wrists. She was forced back against the wall and felt the restraints fastened to something solid and unmovable.

Tristic peered into her face. Her poison blue tongue darted along the top edge of her needle-like teeth.

"I understand that you have recently become enlightened as to teachings of the Fates. Allow me to further your studies. I offer you a new choice on your Path this day, Commander."

Sela blinked. How? How could *she* know about the priest on Tasemar? She had never even told Veradin all of it.

"I shall offer you something that your worshiped captain never did: A choice. I will ask you to make a simple choice. But to do it, you must be honest."

Tristic leaned against her in an intimating whisper. "And, Tyron, to be fair, I can tell if someone is lying."

She drew her chin up and fixed her gaze at the wall.

"Eleven souls, including yourself, that Veradin so heroically rescued from Tasemar even when he had been ordered to abandon you. And impressively, only one casualty. Worthy soldiers whose lives rested in your very hands."

Sela rolled her eyes. She really did enjoy the sound of her own voice.

"Once more, as a demonstration of irony the Fates so tediously enjoy, one of your team finds himself in a similar place at this moment. You face another choice: Who shall live this day? You? Or your loyal sergeant?"

"What?"

"The question is quite simple."

"I don't believe you."

"Do you care to test my resolve?" Tristic canted her head. Poorly feigned sympathy in her voice. "You don't believe me. Understandable. After all, we've only just met."

Sela swallowed, staring blankly. How far did the Defensor's reach extend?

"Here. Let me make this easier for you."

Tristic waved a hand over her shoulder. One of the troopers disappeared. There was jostling somewhere in the corridor beyond. A large figure, a heavy cloth bag over his head, was corralled into the room. His thickly-muscled arms were bound behind him. It took two troopers to control this captive.

"I believe introductions are not necessary."

Tristic traipsed past, lifting the prisoner's hood.

The features were bloodied. The man squinted about the room warily, before his eyes locked onto Sela's. A sob caught in her throat. Valen.

"Now." Tristic sighed. "I see I have made my point."

A grim smile moved across Valen's face.

In response, Sela felt a lunatic grin forming on her mouth.

"Commander."

"Sergeant."

Sela kept her eyes front, her arms sore in their restraining hold. The reassuring weight of her blade pressed against her forearm. The fools had not bothered to search her yet. There was still an edge, a small crack, the possibility of a way out.

"I ask again, Tyron. What Path do you choose? The truth? Or the life of your sergeant?"

Oh. That's right. Tristic was still talking.

Sela looked down at the decking. A familiar red-hot tide of fury filled her. It was not something to be tamed at a time like this. No counting or breathing. Its acrid power gnawed at her, insisting that she rend and tear.

"This…will end badly for you, half-breed," she said.

While Tristic chuckled Sela pulled forward, it distracted from her true intent of trying to get the blade further down into her sleeve. Finally, it eased into her palm and she began to saw at the restraints. The plasti-web was stubborn, but she felt purchase of the knife's teeth on it. The angle was odd. Her left shoulder was a knot of agony.

"My new girlfriend." Valen canted his head toward Tristic. "When I get loose I'm going to skin her—"

A rifle butt connected with Valen's sternum.

"Valen!" Sela strained forward, overreacting. It made it easier to slice the restraints. The sound of her shout covered the "pop" as the straps gave way. Still she kept her hands clasped behind her. Relief uncoiled the muscles in her arms.

Sela started chuckling.

Her sergeant nodded imperceptibly. The smile on his face grew. A low rumbling laugh grew in his throat.

"I will kill you, Tristic," she said.

"No. Allow me," Valen snarled.

With hands still bound before him, Valen lunged at the Defensor. He towered over Tristic's slouched, imperfect frame, obliterating Sela's view. Everything sped up after that.

Sela sprang at the nearest trooper, bringing the blade up. It sliced into his torso within the narrow gap of the trooper's armor. Field armor was meant to protect against plasma rounds and blunt impact of concussion devices, but not the slender threat of a blade in close quarters.

She dragged his body in front of her like a shield. The guard at Tristic's side fired, but the rounds struck the trooper's lifeless body. She claimed his rifle and brought it up, ready to fire on Tristic.

But the Defensor had vanished.

Valen lay in a heap on the deck with the two downed troopers.

"Damn it all." She knelt over him.

He rolled slowly over with a groan. Then she saw the wound in his flank. Bad. It was not from a plasma weapon. He had been stabbed. Carefully, Sela slit the webbing of his restraints.

"Ugly bitch had a blade," he hissed. Sela lifted his shirt from the wound on his side. A renewed stream of blood came with it. Quickly she pressed her hands over the site. Blood seeped between her fingers.

"How bad?" He tried to twist and move her hand.

"Be still."

She glanced around at the three dead or dying troopers.

"Here. Hold pressure." She took Valen's immense hand and clamped it over the wound.

The downed trooper closest to her had tactical pouches with his gear. She began to rummage for a medikit.

"That thing was a lot stronger than she looks." Valen grimaced. "Fast too."

"Why are they doing this, Valen?" she asked, hoping to distract him.

She searched a second pouch. Her fingers met the smooth plastic of a cellseal packet. Her heart leapt. The universe had finally decided to throw her a favor.

"I don't know, boss. That ugly bitch asked a lot of questions about you and the cap'n. She's desperate to find someone called Erelah Veradin."

Sela unraveled the dressing, prepping it. "Desperate?"

Her earlier impression of this as a rogue op had been correct then.

Desperate could be good. It meant they were in possession of a valuable asset. But it also meant that serious hurt would be headed their way, with the considerable resources of Ravstar driving the search for Erelah.

Valen nodded, grimacing. "Who is she?"

"Erelah?" Sela ripped a larger whole in his shirt to get at the wound. "The captain's sister."

"Tristic asked skew things too. Like if I knew of any Humans."

"Humans?" Sela gestured for him to move his hand.

"Weird, right? Makes no sense."

"*None* of this is making sense. What about the others back on the *Storm King*?" She doubted Tristic could threaten an entire company of soldiers in secret. But still…

"No idea." Valen shook his head. "Trinculo sent a team to secure the bay. I held position as long as I could to cover your exit. They used a stunner. Next thing I know I'm looking at the inside of the stockade. Never saw or talked to anyone else."

"It's okay, Sergeant."

"Trinculo never once came to ask me a question."

"He didn't interrogate you?" She paused in her work.

"No. It's like he pretended Veradin's escape never happened." He gave a weak shrug.

"Because Tristic needs it to be quiet," Sela said, recalling Phex's explanation. She realized the hybrid might not have power in all corners of the Regime, but

she did seem to have enough to influence one of the strictest Information Officers Sela had ever encountered. So much for the captain's theory of an incorruptible Trinculo.

This was all skew. This wasn't supposed to happen like this. I was going to stay behind and face the consequences. Not Valen or anyone else.

Sela paused, holding the dressing open with both hands, ready. She met his gaze. He nodded. Moving quickly, she pressed the cellseal against his wound. There was a muted hiss and a waft of burning flesh as the chemicals cauterized the damage. Instead of calling out, Valen pounded a fist against the deck.

The chems in the dressing would react with the heme, forming a seal and jumpstarting the healing process. If the wound wasn't too bad. Sela squelched the rest of that thought.

"That tickles!" Valen grunted through clenched teeth. "You couldn't find the kind that burns?"

Despite their desperation and the thoroughly screwed circumstances, she chuckled and thumped his shoulder.

"Shut up, Sergeant. Or I'll throw another one on your junk."

They needed to find Veradin and get to the Cass.

Sela rose and made her way to the doorway. The fleeing panicked crowds had thinned. They had headed for the bays, she imagined. It would be good cover. But their progress would be slow, impaired by the sergeant's injury.

When she made it back to Valen, he lay on his side, elbow planted into the deck. She helped him to stand.

"Can you run?"

"I'm not up to racing, boss." He gave a mock-plaintive whine.

But he looked away quickly, covering. Valen was hurting. It was written in the way he leaned heavily against the wall.

"Next time."

Sela returned to scavenging the troopers. She claimed another medistat pouch and strung the trooper's rifle over her shoulder. A shatter grenade bandolier joined it. All of their supplies were new issue, she noted with a tinge of jealously. The gear her teams were issued was usually half a decade old, or more.

"So, his sister at least pretty?" he asked, allowing her to loop his massive arm around her shoulder.

"Pretty insane," she muttered, reclaiming the A6. "Let's get out of here, Sergeant."

23

For something that had grown from a class seven fuel outpost to a ghost station, Merx was impressive in size. During Sela's first assignments with Commerce Enforcement, she had seen similar structures. They were always cobbled together, but the enterprising occupants here had added pressurized levels that were shielded from rads and capable of supporting hab. As a consequence, Sela found there was no predictable layout to the newer sections. But if Phex's directions were to be believed, the bay was near.

The bustling marketplace she and Veradin had first encountered was now a deserted shambles. The former patrons and proprietors had apparently dropped their belongings and fled at the sight of what they had perceived as a Regime raid.

In the aftermath, excited specus pheasants warbled in their tiny cages. A gelcid calf bleated listlessly at them from where it was chained to a post. Unattended fires for cooking had been left to burn in the food stalls. The stink of overcooked meat mingled with tendrils of black smoke. If there were atmo scrubbers or fire suppression in this obviously added-on area, Sela would have been surprised. She doubted safety was a key issue with Phex and his fellow leaders of this little scum market.

"How far, boss?" Valen asked.

"Should be the second corridor. Through the market."

Valen moved at a shambling pace as she helped him along the passage. His heavy arm was thrown about her shoulders. The blood from his wound saturated the side of the hateful single suit, plastering it to her skin. She thought of Tasemar, maneuvering Atilio into the temple. Then, it had been Valen doing the helping.

"Hold up," he panted as leaned against the support pole of a canopy. Wordlessly, he unfastened the clasp on the calf's collar. The animal shook its furry head and looked up at them uncertainly.

"Go on." Valen made a swatting gesture.

The animal scampered away with a clatter of tiny hooves.

She muttered. "Always with the animals."

"The ladies love it." He gave her a haggard wink.

During a particularly brutal posting on an agri-colony, Valen had rescued a spike hound pup, risking his own life in the process. She had reamed him out for that one. But eventually she came to realize it was part of who he was. He was a dutiful solider, but not blind to innocent suffering. A crester would have considered him flawed. But his compassion didn't make him weak. Somehow it made Valen stronger in her eyes.

She slipped his arm back over her shoulders and tried to take on more of his weight. His movements had become slower and slower in such a small amount of time. Although it seemed like forever ago, the corridor where they had encountered Tristic and his men was not that far behind.

Another hundred meters and they reached the access to the bay where she hoped the Cassandra was still berthed.

"Great," she spat.

An enormous armored door sealed the passage. This, from its form and shape, was original to the structure and remarkably, still functional. Unluckily, they were on the wrong side of it.

"I was starting to worry this was too easy." Her sergeant muttered as he collapsed against the door. He slid down its side and came to rest on the floor, leaving a bloody smear on the putty colored surface.

"You can go around," Valen said.

"*We*," Sela corrected.

She prodded at the door's control interface. It still had power, but someone had tampered with it. A spray of wires extruded from the box like broken fingers.

She knew the reality. Valen was not going around. He had already lost too much blood. The cellseal wasn't keeping up with it. She had bought him time; that was about it. Just as Valen had for that stupid calf.

"How do you know the cap'n is still there, boss?"

"He's still there. He's stubborn. And stupid."

"And in love with you," Valen added quietly.

"Can it." She groused, examining the remaining circuits for the door interface.

It had been shorted. She selected two wire ends and touched them together experimentally. The door jarred to life, rolling up on unseen hinges. Valen maneuvered away from the frame and came to stand at her side.

The door's motion ground to a halt just above ankle height with the earsplitting screech of metal on metal.

Damn it all.

Crouching low, she looked under the door. She caught a quick view of a ruined corridor beyond, littered with debris. The moment she released the two wires, the door rolled shut.

Arms fire echoed somewhere behind them. Definitely organized and high caliber. The sounds were drawing closer. There was no time left.

Sela reconnected the circuit and the door rolled up once again, stopping at the same height. Something at the other side must be jamming its upward progress. She could most likely squeeze under on her stomach, but Valen was bulkier. She would have to pull him through. But that didn't solve the main problem. With the connecting nodes gone, someone had to physically hold the circuits together to keep the door open. The moment the connection was severed, the door would snap shut.

"Just leave me, boss."

"What? No."

She frowned at the circuits. Perhaps with time, they could figure it out.

"You can make it," Valen urged. "Slip to the other side. See if there's a way to keep the door open on that side."

"That's a big *if*."

There was another volley of weapons fire from much closer. He leaned against her. "I can stay here, hold the door up. You slip through."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Who said anything about leaving me? You're going to come rescue my sweet ass."

"No." Half laugh. Half sob.

Shouts echoed from the far end of the market place. She recognized it as the barking of orders in Regimental Standard.

Once more she reconnected the leads. The door rolled up and gave another clanging screech as it froze. There was nothing promising to wedge it open. Doors like this were meant to come down in a hurry, and often with great force.

"Sela," Valen said. "Time to go."

He placed his giant hands over hers, taking over the circuits.

Another volley of shouts rose from the far end of the market.

"Valen. You are my only friend," she said haltingly.

"Don't go soft on me, boss," he said with a grim smile.

He leaned into the doorframe wearily.

Sela reached out, squeezed his shoulder. Her feet were fixed to the deck. They both knew how this would end, but neither of them was willing to say it. His hand cradled the back of her head. He leaned forward and gently rested his forehead against hers.

As much as she truly felt attached to her captain, there was an unevenness there that could not be classified as friendship. For all her gruesomeness, Tristic was right. She worshiped Veradin. But Valen was her equal.

"Go, Sela."

"I can't."

"You have to. You have to finish this."

Frozen into place, she looked up at him. *My Valen.*

There was movement in the smoky air among the stalls of the marketplace. She turned to look. The EE troopers had found them.

"I'm sorry," Valen said.

Frowning at his strange tone, she turned just in time for his fist to collide with her jaw. A white-hot jolt of pain snapped her teeth together and thundered down her neck. Sela folded. Roughly Valen shoved her to the deck. Stunned, she gasped up at him. But his attention was on the rigged console wires.

The metal door at her back opened and she rolled under it, unable to stop her slide down the sloping floor. Halfway through, she could go no further. Stuck!

"Your gear," he hissed.

She looked down. The bandolier of grenades around her body was wedged. He jerked the belt from around her, pulling it back to his side of the door.

"Valen, stop! Don't!" The effort racked her neck and jaw with pain.

From the door's other side, Sela reached back through. Valen squeezed her hand once and then forced her clear. The door immediately crashed down. When she opened her fist, she saw what he had pressed into her hand: his ident tags.

Realization flooded her. He had taken the bandolier of shatter grenades.

"No!" She sprang to her feet. "Valen!"

Frantically, she searched for the intertace on this side of the bulkhead. There was nothing. The imagined piece of shrapnel that barred the door on its track did not exist. She saw only the smooth planes of the door meeting its frame. It was a secure lock, the type that may have existed on the exterior of the original station,

and now, as a consequence of the cobbled-on building technique, it had become an interior door.

A muted staccato of raised voices shouted commands from the other side of the door. Then came the answering bark of an explosion.

"Valen!"

She pressed her forehead to the metal and shut her eyes.

Gone. He was gone.

24

Around her, the station continued its decline into chaos. Sela was aware of the rumble of the deck beneath her knees and the shouts of the other occupants as they thundered past in their bid for escape or shelter.

The automated voice of the station calmly narrated its own death:

"Alert. Containment breach detected. Levels four through nine. Alert."

She did not know how long she remained in place.

In honesty, she did not care.

And then she felt a hand on her back, forcing her to turn.

Veradin. He shouted down at her, struggling to be heard over the sounds of the ghost station's imminent demise. Overhead the automated voice gave evac instructions to EEVs that in all likelihood no longer existed.

He tugged her to her feet.

"Ty! Let's go!"

She looked up into his reddened face. The cords standing out in his neck. The fear and worry etched there. Stupidly, she could only stare.

He pulled and she took plodding steps to go with him. He was leading her to a docking bay. More shouting. She tumbled in a vicious current of noise, jostled by panicked figures.

Veradin looked over his shoulder at her. She watched his mouth move. The words fell over her ears, disconnected from all meaning.

Sela blinked at him.

He stopped, hand out in a sudden furious arc. A stinging pain along her jaw, the same side where Valen's strike had landed. And the world popped back into place with glaring clarity.

"—have to move, soldier! Now!"

She jerked her arm from his grip and took in her surroundings. The crush of bodies had clotted around them. This was the intersection that led to the docking bay where the Cassandra was berthed.

But no one was moving.

Over the crowd of heads and shoulders, Sela saw why. The bulkhead doors in this section were set to shut on a diagonal track. However, they were wedged open with a makeshift barricade of furniture and pieces of the station itself. There was room for a bipedal being to squeeze through, but none dared.

She watched as a thick-bodied Trelgin was jostled forward by the crowd. He stumbled into the open hatchway. As he floundered to his feet, a plasma round from the corridor beyond disintegrated his head into charred ruin.

Two brutish looking Onari armed with ancient-looking A2 plasma rifles took this as an invitation to return fire. They lunged into the open, firing in the direction of the rounds that took out the Trelgin. The A2s were formidable weapons, capable of burning through most standard field armor, but in the unskilled hands of these two they were virtually useless. The Onari's efforts were uncoordinated and sloppy. Sela doubted they had hit anything worthwhile.

An answering volley of rounds struck the wall above the heads of the two would-be champions and they cowered further behind their barricade.

"Alert. Alert. Catastrophic breach imminent. Evacuate now. Alert. Alert."

"This just gets better and better," Sela muttered, pushing her way forward. The closer she came to the line of fire, the less resistance she encountered from the crowd. No one, it seemed was eager to end up like the Trelgin.

Ducking low, she approached the far right side of the barricade, keeping the bulk of its wall between her body and the corridor. She sensed Jon mimic her movements.

"What are you doing? Stay back," she hissed.

"You say that like you expect me to listen."

Sela shot him a glance. Another volley of plasma rounds struck the wall a foot above their heads. In response they flattened against the deck behind the barricade.

"Don't get your head shot off by those Regime skews, girly." This came from one of the Onari rifleman ducked into the alcove at her back. To Sela the voice seemed almost gleeful. But that was an Onari for you. Their kind were biochemically addicted to what passed for adrenaline in their physiques.

"I'm surprised you haven't already," she sneered.

"Making friends everywhere," Jon said under his breath.

"Stay down, sir."

At that moment, the Onari opened fire again onto the corridor. Their wild rounds struck bulkheads and sent a lighting element exploding in a shower of sparks. Sela took this moment for cover and leaned out into the corridor.

Looking left, she could make out the passage to the docking bay. The outer hatch was still open. The failsafe would have operated to permit access to escape craft. The way to the Cassandra was still open.

To her right, in the direction of the station's inner rings, she saw the true impediment.

At the top of the corridor was the entrenched boarding party of EE troopers. She was able to count three hostiles to each side of the door before a round forced her to pull back behind the barricade. This was their way out too, but something was holding them up.

"Well?" Jon prodded.

"I count six hostiles. More EEs. Armed with ML4 compression rifles. Heavy field armor," she said. "Like the rest."

Why were they waiting? They could have overpowered this point without a second glance. Even used 'cussion grenades and traipsed by in a simple fire-and-advance maneuver like nothing happened—

Then the realization struck her. "Pincer movement."

"Care to share?"

"They're waiting for the flank behind us. They must know we're here."

"What flank?"

She gritted her teeth. "The one Sergeant Valen just neutralized."

"Valen's here?"

She turned to look at him. Her voice was flat as she stilled the angry tremor. "Not anymore."

Jon's expression hardened. He did not know the whole story, but he understood enough.

"Glory all," he muttered, placing a hand on her shoulder. But she shrugged him off.

Can't get mired up in that again. Get the Captain out of here. Then deal.

Sela pulled back from her spot on the barricade and fell alongside the Onari gunmen. They were dressed in a half-assed attempt at uniforms similar to the brain-burnt dock agents. She guessed they might be station security, as dubious a mantle of authority as any. Their A2s were compression modifiable, better suited

to do damage to the EE's heavy field armor than her shiny new A6. The rifles were simply in need of better marksmen.

"We need to get that internal bulkhead closed. Seal off the troopers from the corridor," she said to the one on her right. He seemed larger, more muscular than his partner.

"Firstly, Vokh don't talk," the smaller one answered, pressing close. "Got his tongue cut out back in slam. Second, girly, you conjure we'd not tried that already?"

Sela regarded the speaker. The Onari was thinner across the shoulders. The tiny horns that decorated the brow above the flat yellow eyes were red-tinged, indicating *he* was actually a *she*. The name plate on her neck read: Jint.

"And?" Sela asked.

"Welcome to it," Jint sneered. She jerked her chin in the direction of the alcove directly across from their barricade. "Be m'guest."

Sela saw a control interface like the one she had tried to repair near the marketplace. Its door hung ajar. The wall nearby bore a single bloody handprint. On the floor lay two bodies in an untidy tangle. Both were dressed like Jint and her mute partner.

"The keypass don't work. Code's gotta go in manual. Those skews will cut you t'meat 'fore you know what of."

Sela muttered a curse. But a strategy was already formulating for her. She turned back to Jint. "I need your weapons. Both of them, actually."

"Sure. You wantin' quartz tea and egg dumplings with that, girly?" Jint snarked. "Neither of which is happenin'"

Vokh seemed to sneer his agreement.

"Look, this station has what… five… maybe six minutes left before we're all spaced. Do you think your frozen corpse will need that A2 then?" Sela countered.

Jint's eyes narrowed. A round struck the bulkhead over her right shoulder, but impressively, the Onari did not flinch. Then, she said, "What're your thinks?"

"Lay down a suppressing fire for one of us to make it across the corridor. The alcove looks deep enough to offer cover while we trigger the control to get the hatch shut on the EE's."

"And if'n that don't work?"

"Then I owe you a rifle."

"What're you doing?" Jon asked, drawn in to their exchange.

"My job. Keeping you alive."

The guard watched them. "That your mate, then?" she asked.

"He wishes," Sela replied.

Jint made a stuttering hiss, what Sela realized was the Onari approximation of a chuckle.

"Right then, girly." Jint handed the A2 over to Sela and gave her an appraising look. "I'm guessin' you know which end to be dangerous."

Jon extended a hand to Vokh, ready to claim his rifle as well. At this, the male Onari muttered a low snarl. Apparently life without a tongue did little to impair his ability to make threatening guttural noises. Jint smacked the back of her partner's head. "Yours too. 'Ain't got much t'lose either way."

Jint pried the rifle from Vokh and handed it to Jon.

"Never one t'follow orders well," she groused. "Why change with six minutes left to live?"

Pausing, Sela held her hand out. The way Jon had offered her his, what seemed so long ago. The greeting he had taught her that meant respect, truce.

"Tyron," she offered.

Jint, hesitant, grasped Sela's forearm. The Onari's skin was cold, hardened with scales. She shared the tremor of anxiety there.

"Hope you got a good memory there, Tyron-girly. The keycode is a long one."

"Try me." Sela smirked.

"There has to be another way," Jon said, inspecting the battered A2. "I'll go. I'll do it."

"It has to be me and you know it. You need to get to Erelah."

Sela kept her attention on the rifle. As she suspected, its compression settings had been hacked, making them relatively safer for use in the sensitive environment of the station and less likely to burn through hull to cause a breach. Deftly, with hands slicked in sweat, she pulled the cover off. The nodes were corroded, but she was able to adjust the setting to increase the weapon's output.

"Concentrate fire, waist high, along the jambs. They'll have to draw back and it'll make it hard for them to keep a line of sight," Sela said, trading weapons with him. "The compression is at max. If you have a clear shot at one of them, take it. But you'll—"

"Have fewer rounds to fire," he finished. "I *know* how these work. Ty, look at me."

We're burning time. Don't look at him. Look at him and you'll freeze up.

But she did it anyway. Dark hair mussed up in spikes. Impossibly warm brown eyes that held a silent plea for more time. A new bruise starting at the line of his temple. But he was still perfect. Sela carved that moment into her faultless memory.

"You're the best and the worst thing to ever happen to me," she said. Quickly she kissed him, pulling away before he could respond.

Sela maneuvered up to the right side of the hatchway. Tucked low, she looked back to Jon as he took up a position across from her along the left side of the door. Its downward angle afforded him cover with a better line of fire to the EE entrenchment.

He drew in a deep breath, then nodded. Ready.

She nodded back.

Jon opened fire. The volley was a well-placed cluster compared to the Onari's.

Sela crouched under the canted angle of the hatch, rifle raised. She had little time to aim, instead sprayed rounds in a rough pattern at the imagined location of the cowering troopers. But she missed her footing on the other side of the hatchway. It retrospect, it saved her. Her right foot met nothing but air. In the last possible moment, she decided to tuck and roll into the fall. A well-placed round hit the doorway where her head had been a second before.

A live wire of pain shot up her forearm as her hand went out to break her fall. A sprained wrist. Nasty one. Just enough to make the fingers in her hand feel numb, inflated.

Damnit all.

Jon's cover fire continued. A round struck dead center of a trooper's EE visor. The man fell back, never to reappear.

That's five.

She rolled and pushed up with her right arm. Electric pain raced from wrist to elbow.

Up. Move.

Two strides and she dove into the alcove. It was unavoidable; she had to stand on the body of the dead station security guard to keep cover. Something wet crunched beneath her boots.

With a numb right hand, she flipped back the interface panel. This one had two sets of command pads compared to the sabotaged wire snarl of the one she'd encountered in the marketplace in what now seemed like a decade ago with Valen.

One was for the exterior hatch, where Jon and the remaining trapped inhabitants now waited. The other was the interior hatch, where the EE troopers were perched.

She input the first string of the code.

A lucky round struck the wall inches above her right shoulder. The angle would have been tight for the trooper to have pulled that off. Which meant he would have been exposed. There was an answering report from Jon's side of the corridor, then a guttural cry.

That's four left. We might actually get out of this.

"Ty! Come on!" Jon called. Something in his voice made her look up. His attention was on *his* side of the passage. Bright white flashes lit up the interior of the corridor from *inside* their barricade.

More EE troopers were heading at them from behind. Either Valen had left some of them alive and they had found a way through the damaged blast door at the marketplace, or there was another way around.

No time to wonder.

She input the rest of the code and pressed the activation key, wrist throbbing. There was an unhealthy whir as the pneumatics on the pressure door cycled to life. She stole a glance into the corridor and saw the doors begin to roll shut on their tracks. At that moment Jon focused his shots on the Ravstar troopers, keeping them on their side of the hatch.

Then Sela saw the dark figure move among them.

Tristic stood in the center of the corridor, fully exposed, framed by the shutting doors. When half-breed saw Sela, her head lowered. Tristic's expression seemed like an amused dare, as if to say: this is not done.

Their gazes locked.

I can end this. I can end this right now. For Valen.

Sela brought the A2 up and stepped out into the passage. Her rounds struck center body mass until the rifle charge was dry. Tristic staggered back with each hit. Head still lowered. Her stare still fixed on Sela.

The body armor was strong enough to repel a scatter gun. Or an amped out A2.

She dropped the spent A2. Striding toward the shutting doors, she drew her sidearm and fired, left handed. The move was clumsy. The rounds struck the shutting door just to Tristic's right. Refocusing her aim, compensating for her non-dominant hand, Sela fired again. One struck on the shut hatch where Tristic's hideous face would have been.

"Let's move!" Jon grabbed her arm.

He tugged her along and they ran with the diminished crowd of refugees that flooded the passage, all headed for the docking bay.

25

"You want to tell me what in Nyxa's name that was about?" Jon demanded as they sprinted up the Cassandra's ramp.

"I saw an opportunity and I took it," Sela snapped. She pounded the manual override with her fist as she ran past. The ramp began to retract. The inner hatch sealed behind her.

"An opportunity to get killed? Who were you firing on?" Jon replied as he climbed up the ladder to the command loft. Sela followed close behind.

She slid beneath the railway and onto the grav bench beside him. "A Defensor. Calls herself Tristic. The bitch killed Valen," she answered. "She's the reason why Ravstar is hunting your sister."

The Cass's engines were already rumbling awake. Their uncertain, angry rattle told her Veradin wasn't going about this gracefully. They needed to get gone soon.

"Where is Erelah? How did she get out?"

"Does it matter? She's secured now," he shot back, his attention split between the forward view and keying up the 'pulsion controls.

That meant he had made it safely to the Cassandra but had elected to go back for her. Strategically unsound.

"You came back to find me. It was a dumb risk to take."

"You're kidding, right?" he snapped.

Hurriedly, he keyed the propulsion activation. The sudden acceleration thrust her back into the cushions. Veradin guided the Cass under and around the outstretched arms of the dying station's docking rings. At least a dozen other ships, all shapes and sizes, were leaving en masse.

As they dodged a large, slow-moving cargo tug, Sela saw it: the Ravstar vessel. Phantom class. It was a thing of deadly beauty. It had positioned itself between the station and the flex point, perched just beyond the swinging arch of Merx's docking arms like a funnel spider standing guard at its trap. The size was unimpressive, compared to the station. But she made up for that with armaments.

"Jon."

"I see them, I see them," Veradin growled.

She squirmed as they darted under the body of a floundering panzer class transport.

He reached across her and set a new command on the enginesys.

Sela gaped. "That's the maneuvering engine. We need that."

"Wait. Just wait."

She reached, but was held back by the straps of the chair. He swatted her hand away and unclipped her safety harness.

"I have an idea." Jon said.

He paused, ducking instinctively as a fat-bellied freighter zigged into their present course. At that moment she saw what he was doing: using the bulk of the larger vessels to make it difficult for the Ravstar vessel to detect their position. The Cassandra was still transmitting a fraudulent ident, but her form and mass stood out in the sea of ancient transports and cargo skiffs.

"Go," he said. "Find the cesium manifold."

She climbed over the top of the seat and darted for the corridor, then turned. "Then what?"

"Just wait." His attention was torn between the enginesys and the piloting controls.

"Wait. Be nice. Don't kill anyone," she muttered as she swung neatly down the ladder to the companionway.

For a moment she stalked in a hectic circle, peering through the grates of the decking underfoot. There! She spotted it, the dull flat box that protected the pressurized cesium line. With a metal clatter, she flipped the deck panel out of the way and hopped down into the smaller space.

"Still waiting!"

"Good. Get ready to prime the feed. We have to try a cold spool-up."

Sela ran a hand through her hair, thinking. Cold spool-up was a brief training from years ago. Even that technology had been with a far newer vessel, an SP9 Crossfire, not a piece of antiquity like the Cassandra. It was a chancy maneuver to demand speed before the engines were at full prime.

Sighing, she tipped the case open with the toe of her boot and was greeted with a specimen fit for a museum.

Sela bellowed up at the loft. "It's ancient—"

"S'ok. Either way, we're dead."

"Well… that makes it easier."

"Wait for my mark."

She located the primer feed. Corrosion peppered the joint with green speckles. She reached for the valve and immediately drew her hand away, hissing. That bastard was hot!

The deck beneath her gave a sudden lurch, followed by a disconcerting groan of metal. She clenched her teeth. This might not be the best idea.

"Cap'n?"

"Okay, now!"

Wrapping her hand with her sleeve, she pulled. Nothing. The damned handle would not budge. Corrosion had sealed the joint.

"Now!" he bellowed. "*Now* would be good."

Again, nothing. The access was awkwardly placed. Sela shifted, bracing against the deck and kicked at it. It swung open stubbornly. There was a shuddering pause. A horrifying metal groan issued from the Cass. She squeezed her eyes shut and flattened against the bulkhead.

Nothing.

Sela leaned forward to yell up at the command loft. "Nothing. It didn't—"

Suddenly, the vessel lurched forward like a startled animal. Sela crashed against the lip of the deck. Her head struck something as a white flash filled her field of vision.

"Close it. Close it!"

She scrambled back to the line. This time the access valve moved much more easily. The seal clacked shut. The Cass gave another, less catastrophic lurch. Sela collapsed onto her back on the decking, nerves unbundling.

"Ty! You did it!" He released a jubilant shout from the loft. "We're through the flex point!"

Sela lay that way for a long time as she entertained bodily harm to the Last Daughter of Veradin.

Erelah woke to darkness. Panic instantly settled onto her chest. Since childhood she had hated and feared the dark. Her time with Tristic had only worsened it.

Frantically, she reached out. Her hands met cold rounded metal shapes. Then, not far from that, a wall, an arm's reach from the one against which her back rested. She was in a tiny room, all metal. The sounds of her movements, her breathing, echoed flatly in the small space. She recognized the pungent smell of sanitation fluids. Then she realized. This was the wasterec on the Cassandra. The door was to her left. Dimly she could make out a thin line of white light along the floor. She rose, sliding along the wall and pawed at the door. The latch would not turn. Jon had locked her in. *Why?*

"Jon!" She pounded at the door.

The door was flung open. Light flooded the room.

Tyron was upon her with incredibly powerful hands, thrusting her against the wall. Cesium fuel vapors clung to the older woman's blood-stained clothing in a noxious cologne. She was a wild-eyed shield maiden of Nyxa, come to deliver her death.

"Why was Ravstar waiting for us?" Tyron demanded. "Who is Defensor Tristic? Why does she want you?"

Erelah was afraid of how it would feel to have that bare skin touch her own and connect that circuit of Tyron's rage. She feared that more than the threatening words or the pain she could bring.

Erelah could only blink at her.

"Ty! Stop it!"

Jon inserted himself between them.

Tyron's arm was pried away.

Erelah sank away, sliding down the wall. And watched. It all seemed to happen in another room, far removed from this one. They were two familiar-looking people, pulling off a convincing play of anger.

Jon shoved Tyron back. Head lowered, she turned her anger at him.

"I deserve answers! Valen died for her!"

"Yes, but not like this!"

Jon stood between them. He was tensed, hands out at his sides, ready to repel Tyron's next attack.

"Calm down. We'll do this, but not with you like this. Get it under control, soldier."

Erelah felt Tyron's cool stare from over Jon's shoulder. Forget shield maiden; she was Nyxa incarnate, ready to bring torturous death.

She leveled a finger at Erelah. "I never forget."

"Enough!" Jon shoved her from the room.

Erelah shivered beneath the blanket Jon had wrapped over her shoulders. The galley was cold, the way Fleet kept their vessels. He always liked things that way, she recalled. His rooms back on Argos. Even arguing with Uncle about the size of the fire in the hearth. *How appropriate*, she thought, feeling Tyron's frigid stare. The soldier had changed from the bloody clothes but looked no less terrifying from her place near the doorway.

Beneath Erelah's bare feet, the ship muttered on with its uneven hum, something else to gnaw on her nerves.

A fourteen percent imbalance between the cesium expellers. Nothing a simple recalibration wouldn't fix. But she doubted they were interested in her diagnosis right now.

Erelah wound pale hands around the steaming cup of insta-cal that Jon forced on her, and savored its warmth against the mysterious cuts on her fingertips. The thought of food made her want to retch. But she took small sips of the bland stuff just to please him.

Jon sat on the bench opposite from her. His hands on his knees. His back rigid. She could not stand the intense look on him, as if she were a stranger, someone he'd never met.

He reached across the space between the two benches to place a hand on her knee. She shied away.

The intensity in his gaze softened, replaced by hurt. He drew back.

"Tell us, Erelah. All of it. We need to understand."

/Yes. Tell him all, Veradin. Confirm their suspicions. Let them know the full danger you bring them./

Erelah drew in a quivering breath and pushed back against Tristic's voice.

Not now.

But it was easier than before. She had a sense that something had happened to weaken the Defensor, if just temporarily. She still felt Tristic in there, seeking a way through, scratching. It was like an itch at the back of the throat, a dull ache that lingered and would freshen if prodded.

Regardless of the reprieve from Tristic's presence, it was still hard for her to recount time as an orderly set of events. Although the pharms were well gone

from her body, she felt as if she were dissolving, barely able to hold her shape. She was a collection of pieces that belonged to now-Erelah and then-Erelah.

Jon cleared his throat. She realized she had started to go away again.

"There was a NeuTech installation. It was where I worked… with others. High clearance, very few of us. Adan. Tilley. Myrna…"

Those are names of dead people.

Tyron gave an impatient sigh. Jon shifted.

"The ship we called *Jocosta*… for the project. Something new: a j-drive. It was meant to replace velo drive, but on smaller ships. But special."

"Special how?" Jon asked.

"Ships that can travel without mapped conduits… can make their own FPs."

"Like the stryker in the bay? It can do that?"

Tyron said, derisively. "This is inefficient. Ask her about Tristic. About Ravstar's involvement."

"Maintain, Tyron," Jon said, his voice pitched with warning.

Erelah retracted further beneath the blankets, away from their raised voices.

Tryon resumed pacing.

Jon nodded for Erelah to continue.

She swallowed, granting Tyron a wary look.

"It worked," Erelah said with a broken smile. Tears invaded her vision.

Jon leaned forward, expression carved with concern. His pity was suffocating. She gazed down at the cooling cup in her hands instead. "And then… then… Tristic learned about me. She decided I was so much more useful than the new j-drive tech."

"What makes you so bloody important?" Tyron sneered. Jon turned stiffly, frowning at his woman. She glowered back at him.

"I used the *Jocosta* to get away. But that's not why she wants me. The stryker….the new drive…they're *toys* to her. She can make a fleet of them if she wants, she has the plans. She wants *me*. I'm perfectly imperfect. She wants to use me."

"Use you? How?" His stare was fierce, his jaw muscles clenched.

"She's dying," Erelah said. "She's terrifyingly brilliant. She has eyes and ears everywhere. But she's also dying."

"But why does she want to use you? Help me understand."

"You'll believe me?" Erelah looked up at him, feeling warm tears slip down her cheeks.

He nodded. "I promise."

"She wants to *be* me… to wear me. I go away. And she becomes me, living in my body. She can do it now, bit by bit. But to do it for good and make it final, she needs me in the flesh."

"*Be you*?" Tyron mocked. She looked her up and down, measuring. "If she could really inhabit another body, why not someone bigger, more powerful? More like me? Or Jon? Or Valen?"

"Because I was different than the others." She sobbed. "Imperfectly perfect. Perfectly imperfect."

Jon came to Erelah's side of the bench. She allowed him to pull her close, careful not to touch his skin. She curled against him and listened to their tense buffet of words.

"The stryker, I can understand. But this. I don't believe this. It doesn't make sense."

"And you know everything now?" Jon shot back. "Miri knows what Ravstar experiments on. Bioweapons. Psy-Ops. Is it that far-fetched?"

Tyron answered with a derisive grunt.

"The question is how we use this intel," Jon said.

"I don't know, sir. But we have an advantage, a slight one," Tyron answered.

"Advantage?" Jon asked. "How?"

"Although I still question the reasons why Tristic wants her—"

"Why would my sister lie?"

Tyron continued, speaking over him. "Before his death, Sergeant Valen told me that Tristic was desperate to locate Erelah. That does corroborate her… version of events. The Defensor did appear physically ill. If Tristic is dying then we just wait her out. We withdraw to the Reaches to elude capture. We wait for Tristic to die."

Jon was quiet. Then: "Withdraw. Shelter in place."

"Exactly, sir. Modified attrition." Tyron actually sounded eager. Erelah could nearly hear the click/whir of the rational motor in the soldier's mind.

They didn't understand. They didn't get it. They've never been unmade. But they did not live with this thing in their heads, curled in its inky den and feasting on everything that once made them whole. Scratching. Burrowing.

"It's not that easy. It doesn't work that way." Erelah shoved away from Jon's embrace. The mug tumbled to the floor. She climbed to her feet, backing away from both of them. "She's still *connected* to me. That's how she knew to find me at that station. She can sight-jack me, take me over, but not permanently. I can

push her out, but I keep losing ground. *I* can't wait her out. I can't hide from her."

The air was filled with the nerve-jangling rattle of the Cassandra's engines.

"Sight-jack? Really? You are obviously psych-damaged," Tyron spat.

"Enough, Sela!"

She turned her anger onto him. "Your emotional connection to her is blinding you to some basic facts."

"Stop it!" Jon rose, stepping into Tyron's way.

Fearful, Erelah recoiled, her feet tangling in the blanket. She fell back against the wall.

In one cat-like move Tyron slipped around Jon and cornered her against the bulkhead. "You forget one thing. You're Eugenes. A Sceeloid, not even something like Tristic can sight-jack a Eugenes. That's why we have Purity codes. That's why we purge the non-reg races."

At this, Erelah gave Jon a strained look. He was a bundle of guilt: head bowed, eyes shut. The muscle of his jaw compressed. He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck.

Did he not tell Tyron about Helio's message?

Their unspoken exchange did not go unnoticed by Tyron.

"What?" She glowered, straightening.

"You've not told her, have you?" asked Erelah, careful to use High Eugenes.

"There's never been a right time," he replied in the same. Expelling a ragged sigh, he dragged his hands down his face.

"What are you saying?" Tyron demanded.

"Ty, I have to tell you something."

Her moves wary, the soldier backed away. The suspicious glint in her amber eyes was entirely focused on Jon. "Tell me what?"

"Erelah and I are Human."

26

Sela stormed along the common passage. The curved walls were a liquid blur. There was no destination, save escaping the crushing sensation in her chest. But each footstep seemed to give it strength.

"Just listen for a moment, please."

Jon's voice was like a tether affixed to something deep within her. Her feet slowed, not out of obedience, but because she had run out of hallway to storm at the cargo bay hatch. Her face was mirrored in the portal there, ghostlike. Reflected behind her, she saw Jon slow to a halt.

And his hand was on her arm, turning her. The walls changed places. Then with sudden ferocity he was kissing her, full and hard. As if he would inhale her, drink in everything she was. The last kiss of a condemned man.

Clear. I need to be clear.

She pushed him away, curbing her strength. "Stop. Just stop."

His eyes held a bigger looming doubt. Whatever it was, she still felt that urge to crush it, for threatening this man. But it would crush her in return, she knew that now.

The hall seemed too narrow. The air was flat and metallic, as if the scrubbers were no longer working. The unhealthy vibration of the engines found every painful bruise and magnified the ache in her shoulder, her wrist. It all suddenly threatened to overwhelm her. Sela slowly sank down the wall, knees drawing up.

"Did you always know?" she asked up at him. "Even before… all of this?"

"No." Jon knelt before her. "I had no idea. My whole life is a lie that Uncle told us."

"That was the message, wasn't it? From the avatar on Newet?"

"Yes," Jon said. "Uncle did it to keep us safe. He was too late to save our parents. So he raised us. Erelah and me. He hid us in plain sight to keep Seekers from killing us. We were never meant to leave Argos. Helio was doing what he thought was right."

"By lying to you about your own nature?"

"He meant to tell us. Things just… happened. That's why he left the message."

She looked into Jon's warm brown eyes so full of reckless hope and devoid of guile. Sela saw a man that she would have foolishly worshiped, no matter what. Here stood someone she was expected to call her enemy.

But that was not the source of the crushing hurt.

"Say something," he said finally.

"I don't care." Her own voice sounded small and lost to her.

"What?"

"I don't care that you're Human. I know that I should. It's what I've been trained to do. But, I don't."

His shoulders sagged with relief.

"You told me so many times that you thought me more than a simple soldier. That you saw something different in me." She felt her throat tighten. "Yet you kept the truth from me. Why would you not *trust* me? After everything that I've done. After everything we've been through. Haven't I proven you can trust me?"

"I know. And I'm sorry," he said, leaning in. His forehead pressed to hers and his warm hand cradled the back of her neck. "I didn't know how to say it. For Miri's sake, I didn't even believe it myself at first. I was afraid."

"Afraid?" She placed her hands on his shoulders, pushing him back gently.

"Of what you would think of me. Afraid to lose you." He grabbed her left hand.

"As opposed to what I think of you now? How is this better?" Sela pulled her hand away.

The skin around his eyes tightened. And he sank back onto his haunches.

"And I had always thought myself unworthy of *you*." Sela rose, sliding up against the curve of the wall. Careful not to touch him as she strode away.

It had been some time before the quiet mutter of Jon and Tyron's hurt voices faded in the passage outside. Now there was only a heartsick silence.

Perhaps they have forgotten me. I would like to be forgotten. That would make not being so much easier.

Erelah sat before the gutted remains of the coms array interface. This was a plaything, she realized, devoid of any useful active components to complete the system. Jon had thought of that. It was something to occupy her. The same way Old Sissa would give her trinkets and broken costume jewelry to entertain her as a child while the old woman kneaded bread in the great warm kitchen in the house on Argos.

"Erelah."

Instinctively her shoulders drew up toward her ears, fearful that Tristic had returned, full of admonishment. The evil queen had come so close, only to have her prize snatched away. And she knew that Erelah had been talking about her, telling secrets.

Not there. Not there.

Cautiously Erelah reached a quivering hand for the circuit node, then withdrew, uncertain. Jon would not let her have the soldering iron. Nothing that could cut or burn.

"Erelah."

She flinched. But she said nothing, and wiped her chin against the collar of her rumpled clothes.

"Erelah. What is it?"

And Jon was standing across the table from her.

She looked up at him. "Oh. It *was* you."

He seemed so lost, hurt. It was written in the slope of his shoulders and the red-rimmed eyes.

You've come to the right place, brother. This is where broken things congregate.

"Who else would it be?" His forehead wrinkled. "Tristic? You can hear her?"

"Mostly all the time now. But right now, she's quiet. I think she got hurt at the station. Good."

Erelah's gaze slipped away, looking over his shoulder to watch the shadow traipse past him: dark hood, stooped, a flash of pale skin. She focused with such intensity that Jon even turned to look.

But she knew he would not see.

Jon rounded the table, taking a seat at her side. He grabbed her hands. Erelah quickly slipped them from his reach and drew them back inside the cuffs of her shirt.

"What is it? Tell me and I'll help you," Jon said.

Tears blurred her vision. Once more the darkness over his shoulder drew her attention.

She looked down and whispered over clenched teeth. "Make her stop."

"Who?"

"Tristic."

She was taking a chance even saying the name. After all, she could hear everything.

"*How* do we make it stop, baby sister?"

Erelah slid back along the bench. "I've said too much."

"Erelah, there's no one else here." His face clouded with doubt.

He thinks I'm mad.

Oh. If only it were that simple. She shrugged, a jerky, hitched motion.

She looked up at him, feeling her eyes fill with tears. "I don't know. I try to be strong. But I can't fight forever."

Jon propped an elbow on the table and rested his forehead in his hand. "I'm failing everyone."

After a long silence, Erelah turned her focus back to the remains of the coms array. It felt better to watch her hands work.

"You hurt her, you hurt your Ty…but she knows what to do with pain. Like when she hurt her wrist. 'You turn it into something else.' Just like the drillers would teach," she said simply, pulling a nest of tangled wires from the casing. "I wish someone had taught *me* that."

"The drillers?" Jon asked, frowning. "Did Sela tell you that?"

"Like *she* would ever talk to me." Erelah rolled her eyes. "Just something I saw."

She was only vaguely aware of his expectant silence before she withdrew inward, fingers nimbly tracing the circuits of the damaged beacon. It felt better to focus on this than the thing at the other side of her brain, scratching and digging for a way in.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

Sela grunted, trying to stretch the clinging mesh of the cellseal across her shoulder. It was hopeless, awkward. She had used a pain dampener from the stolen medikit on her injured wrist. Already the swelling had receded as it set to work fixing the sprain, but it had temporarily deadened the sensation in her right

hand. She gave up, and the free end of the binding flopped uselessly against her skin.

The remaining contents of medistat kit lay scattered across the bunk beside her. There were meds and supplies that would have cared for her team on Tasemar. Not to mention a field surgery kit that could have kept Atilio alive.

Possibly Valen. In the hands of the right person.

That thought was black and bitter. She lashed out with her free arm. Vials and metal clamps scattered across the room. A tincture bottle cracked, spilling the smell of antiseptic into the small space.

There was no breathing or counting to ten. Not for this.

Perhaps that was a story Veradin made up too.

Her breath came in angry hitches.

Nothing made sense. There was no goal, nor glory. There was only running and hiding and secrets.

Perhaps it would be better to find a Eugenes colony before they traveled much deeper into the Reaches. She could go there, make up whatever story she wanted.

And what? Wind up like Lineao? Studying to be a priestess to the Fates? The thought of a living in celibate purity on the same little world wedged in the ass crack of nowhere made her want cringe.

"Here. Let me." Jon was there, kneeling before her.

His hands were warm and firm as he pressed the filament to the tender flesh of her shoulder. She felt the mild stinging of the pharms and binding agents. Their warmth spread down into her arm. With it, her fury began to subside as well.

"Better?" he asked.

Her answer was a terse nod, her gaze trained on a dark corner of the room. She started to insert her arm back into the sleeve of her ruined shirt. Jon stopped her. He made a quieting noise even as she drew in a breath to protest.

"You'll just…undo everything," he cautioned. He helped her tug the sleeve back over her arm and closed the shirt's fasteners for her.

Sela prodded the ruined kit with her toe. A glass vial rolled across the floor to strike the doorframe. A sick feeling seeped in around her edges. Trashing the kit had been a childish thing to do.

"This kit is newly manufactured. Something D Company would never have been issued. There are things in it I don't even know how to use. But Atilio… he might have. Perhaps even things that could have helped Valen," she said, head bowed, knowing what a false hope that was.

Jon stepped over the spilled bottles and bandages, purposefully oblivious to the evidence of her rage. He sat on the edge of the bunk across from her and said, "Valen was a good soldier."

"He was my friend. I could trust him." She looked at him, unflinching. "With anything. And he trusted me."

His pained expression was rewarding, in a petty way. But it felt just as wrong as what she had done to the kit. She rested her forehead against the metal frame of the bunk and experimentally stretched her shoulders, flexed her neck. The throb in her shoulder was subsiding.

Things were always so clear when she was angry or in pain. The cooling aftermath was so much more nebulous and difficult to navigate.

The Cass thrummed around them in its uneven, aged timing.

"The refueling wasn't complete," Jon said. "But we can stretch what we have for some time, if we're careful."

She shut her eyes at the refreshed rage his words provoked. He was talking around everything that had just happened.

"Don't do that. Don't confess this enormous truth and then pretend it never happened." It was a struggle to make her voice even.

"I hurt you. And I'm sorry. Forgive me," he said.

Sela felt him watching her expectantly. She finally turned to him.

"Hurt. Pain. I know how to deal with those. That's one of the first things the drillers teach you in the kennels." She gave a humorless smile. "This hurt is… different. But all wounds heal, Jon. Even this one. And at a moment like this, I can understand why there are rules for interaction, why there is Decca. It would be easier to say that I wish I had never met Jonvenlish Veradin."

Eyes shut and head bowed, Jon blew out a sigh. "Ty—"

"But then," Sela leaned across the space to him. Hesitantly, she reached out. Her fingers moved under his chin, tilting his face up. She held his eyes with her own. Her voice was barely above a whisper. "I would have never known all the times with you that *aren't* like this. I would not give those moments up for anything."

The bunks were narrow, not meant for two. Afterward, Sela lay in one, Jon lay in another, separated by a slender passage. She watched the quiet, regular rise and fall of his bare chest picked out by the dim light from the corridor and

decided he was asleep. She reached into the darkness of the floor between the bunks, seeking her discarded clothes.

His hand seized her forearm.

"What're you doing?" His voice was drowsy.

"Getting dressed. If we're done here—"

"*Done*?" His voice flared with annoyance. "This isn't a rec suite. And I'm not some random grunt."

"I know. And I've never been in a rec suite with a *random* grunt." Sela shot back. She felt foolish and exposed. This wasn't how this was supposed to have happened. In fact, it was never supposed to happen.

"That's not what I meant. Just…" He raked a hand through his hair and blew out an exasperated sigh. Sitting up, he tugged her trousers away from her, tucked them under his pillow and lay back down.

"What're you doing?"

"Sleeping. So are you. Lay down."

He pulled her toward his bunk and rolled onto his side, making room.

"But the nav—"

"Can wait. Sleep. Now."

Stiffly, she climbed in beside him. His hand pulled against her hips, forcing her to lean back into his chest. His breath stirred the hair on the top of her head.

They lay in silence until Jon broke it. "The moment I first saw you, I never thought this would happen. I mean us here… like this. I had just arrived on the *Storm King*. You were some name on a list until then. There was a briefing to meet all the platoon leaders."

"Command orientation and reassessment," Sela corrected. "You were eight minutes late."

"Of course *you* remember that," he returned. She nudged him, realizing he was teasing her.

"Throughout most of it, you made a very specific point of not looking at me. Like I didn't exist."

"Protocol dictates…" she began.

"Oh don't try that. You were pissed. Admit it."

She rolled her eyes.

"But that was fine by me because what do you say to a goddess when they look right at you? Especially one that's pissed that you're taking their job."

"I never meant to—"

"Of course you did. Liar." He laughed softly. "You were talking to Valen and ignoring me. And I remember watching you, just wishing I could stop everything, freeze it right there. Because it was perfect. You looked so… perfect. That cramped briefing room that was always too warm, the chairs designed by a sadist, all of it. Perfect. Because you were there."

"Perfect?" she laughed. "Hardly."

His voice seemed to fold slightly, when he added, "I know it sounds silly to you."

"It doesn't sound silly."

She turned, granting him her profile. Sela had never thought an ordinary moment could be filled with beauty or mystery. And she would have certainly never thought anyone would describe her as a goddess.

What do you say to that?

She could tell him of the hot, incense-ridden air of Tasemar and watching the *Storm King* draw its ponderous arc across the night sky and wishing him there at her side. But then her thoughts drifted to Atilio, who had also rested in that same room, dying.

The words came out before she stop them: "When I saw Atilio, I knew he was my son."

Veradin drew in a quiet breath. But he said nothing. His hand flexed on her waist. He kissed her shoulder.

"I was a just booter when I had him. Fifteen standard."

"Fifteen?" he asked. But he had to have known. "That's young for an assigned breeding."

"It wasn't. It was an… error."

He shifted against her.

"Ty, you don't have to talk about—"

"In the kennels, we were given pharms: caps, jectors. I don't know what all. Vaxes. Meds to combat fatigue. It was just something that was done. We never asked. There was even this thing implanted under the skin. Right here." She shifted, pointing to an area just below her navel. "Like a tracer, but just the females. Thing made me puke all the time. One day when the drillers weren't watching our cluster, I dug it out."

"Cluster?"

"The drillers called us that. It fit, I think. A *cluster*. Not yet deserving of the term troop or platoon."

They had been nothing but a mass of gangly limbs and unmolded minds, just starting to reach adult height, which for Sela was tall compared to the others. It made her stand out, as did the light amber of her eyes and the fine symmetry of her features. In a kennel, standing out was not often a good thing. It could bring the wrong sort of attention.

"I was selected as cluster leader for drills and special ops mock-ups. Sometimes I was a fumbling skew, but more often I did well."

"I could see that," he offered. "That you did well from the start."

Sela recalled a driller telling her in a half-mocking tone of her natural talent to lead. Something a booter should never take seriously. The drillers alternated insults and encouragements from rack out until rack in.

"Except Stelvick, an alpha in my cluster. He saw me as a threat, I think. He had the heart of a killer without the soul of a soldier's discipline to temper it."

"Stelvick?" His tone incredulous, damning. "They named one of you after that beast?"

Sela nodded. "Fitting, if you knew him. It's like they know sometimes what we'll become when they name us."

"And, this boy, he…"

"He may have been a boy, but he was already a monster, enormous."

Stelvick was reluctant to obey a direct order from her when she was appointed team leader. When he did obey, it was with muttering indolence. He brutalized his opponents in the training exercises, needlessly injuring and seldom heedful of reprimands. His wrath would turn easily on the other members of their cluster.

"Perhaps every litter at the kennels has struggles over the balance of power. Always a strong one, perhaps too much so, too content to kill without forethought. Too prone to violence. Maybe the drillers intended it that way, as a means to allow us to sort ourselves out, thin the pool."

"I don't know. They don't tell us much about the kennels."

She could not bear the strain of apology in his voice. Did he not understand that this was the only life she'd known? This was just how it was. Awkwardly, she rolled over in the bunk, facing him.

"Shall I stop, sir?" Sir. There. The title came out unbidden. She bit her lip.

His voice was odd, thick sounding. "I hate that you had to live like that… grow up that way."

"It made me who I am. I don't know anything else."

"It still doesn't make it right."

"Stelvick was just waiting for an opportunity. The others were at mess. Not a driller in sight. I'd been injured that morning during hand-to-hand, so I was resting in the barracks."

That was not the whole truth. Sela had been reluctant to go to the medicenter. Sometimes, an injured booter would go there and never return. *Recycled*, the drillers called it. She had not wanted to risk being recycled. Whatever that meant.

"He knew I would fight and that I was injured so he ambushed me."

She recalled the staggering explosion of pain at the back of her head. The tiles of the waste rec room cold and solid on her face. Sudden rough hands on her as her stunned brain struggled to catch up with the physical onslaught. The purr of ripping fabric. Cold air meeting exposed skin. And his terrible weight and the invasive pain of him. His sneering voice: *Next time you give an order to me, you skeen bitch, you think on this. Long and hard.*

But Sela had decided to tell no one. Not a driller or a single member of her cluster.

"Certainly he had to be charged? Punished?" Jon asked.

Sela rolled onto her back and looked up into the empty black of the ceiling. It was difficult to look at him when she lied.

"He was dealt with."

What happened to her was not going to happen to another female. Any leader would make the same decision to protect her team. And so she waited for her chance, her own opportunity to ambush. She wanted to say she relished it. But she did not. There was an inquiry after his body was found, but hardly an energetic one. Perhaps even the drillers had been relieved that Stelvick was gone. No one had seen or heard a thing. Stelvick was an unfortunate casualty.

"Days later, I became sick. Except, it was not illness."

"Atilio?"

She nodded with a thin humorless smile. "By then, I figured out what the implant had been for."

As an example to other females that did not conform, the drillers decided the non-reg breeding would not be terminated. Instead, Sela was trained well into the final days of the accelerated pregnancy. Her heart felt like it would explode whenever she took a single step and her stomach bowed out in a great embarrassing arc. The looks, the taunts. Sela bore it all in silence. She had done them all a favor. She had slain the monster living among them. The punishment had been worth it.

"Seventeen years later," Veradin said. "And the boy ends up assigned under his own mother. The Fates—"

"Coincidence."

The thought that what had happened with Stelvick or her son was engineered by an unseen entity made her feel hollow.

"My son is gone now. It's like he never happened. It feels like it did when they first took him from me."

"I don't know what to say."

Sela sat up, pulling away from him. She felt suddenly clumsy, flushed and very aware of her lack of clothes. This had been so foolish. She could not stand the anguish in his gaze, the pity in his voice.

"Where are you going?" His fingertips traced down her back.

Sela slid her hand beneath his pillow, freeing her confiscated clothes. "I think we both know this was a mistake."

"Mistake? That's not what I think at all."

"I do."

Balled-up clothing clutched to her waist, she left.

27

The water in the shallow basin was torturously cold. Sela splashed her face and neck again and again, until her skin felt numb. Finally she sagged against the compact silver sink of the waste rec room. Eyes shut, she rested her forehead against the mirror. She released a long pent-up breath, opened her eyes.

"What are you doing, Tyron?" she muttered at her reflected twin.

Wrong. It had all been wrong. But right, at the same time.

Little wonder there were the rules of Decca to prevent fraternization between subordinates and their superiors. Sela had imagined being with Veradin, but always in a vague sense. The way you crave something in an absent unrealized manner, thoughts buoyed up without a hint of reality for support—a self-indulgent daydream.

Just as she had confessed to Jon, it did not truly matter to her that he was Human. His persona had not changed with this discovery. In fact it showed the consistency of his character: he was willing to carry the burden of this life-rending discovery alone rather than risk losing her.

But it had changed Sela.

Things were complicated enough. They had become unwitting pieces in some strategy that neither of them was likely to glimpse as a whole until it was too late. And she had permitted this self-absorbed fantasy to play out. She had succumbed to a baser desire to have him.

Now it was done. Out there. Irreversible.

Their vulnerability was complete. If Jonvenlish Veradin was her weakness before, now it was far worse.

"Focus," she said.

It can never happen again. It will never happen again.

Drawing a deep breath, she toweled the water from her face and neck and got dressed. She had taken a fresh shirt from Jon's belongings, doubting he would mind. It was oversized for her, but lacking in bloodstains. She paused. A quiet murmur drifted into the corridor. The sound of a voice.

Sela checked the vox panel just over the sink. Its lights were dark. The vox link was inactive. Jon still occupied the bunkroom. That left one thing: Erelah

Pulling on the shirt, Sela slipped out into the common passage.

The voices grew louder as Sela reached the tiny galley. It was an argument but she could not discern words. One voice plaintive and childlike, the other more direct, commanding.

In the shaft of light cut from the common passage Erelah sat on the floor, leaning against the bulkhead with her back to the doorway.

"Who are you talking to?" Sela asked.

Erelah turned and looked up at her, wide eyed, plainly startled. She did not sound entirely certain when she replied. "I wasn't talking."

"I heard voices."

Sela's forward motion triggered the internal lights. They revealed dark maroon smears along the sleeves and collar of Erelah's baggy flight suit. Furtively, the girl turned away, hiding her hands.

"What do you have?"

"Nothing." Erelah stared straight ahead.

Sela yanked the young woman's hand from behind her back and wrenched the object from her fingers. It was a shiv, more accurately a piece of sharp metal from the coms array casing. Still in control of Erelah's arm, Sela rolled the girl's sleeve up. A crazed pattern of welts seeped blood from the pale skin of the girl's forearm.

"Why would you do this?"

"I can't get them off. See? Scales, pushing out of my skin. Like Tristic." Erelah pulled her arm away and with her other hand, scratched at the injured skin. She looked up at her with those eerie green eyes. She was like a child, pleading. "If I scrape them off, Tristic can't come in."

She grabbed the girl's wrists, trying to keep her from injuring herself further.

"There's nothing there. No scales. Only skin. You're damaging yourself."

Sela had encountered soldiers like this. It always seemed to be the 'scriptors. They could not hack what they experienced in battle. The fear consumed them

from the inside, erasing their pride and reducing them to broken things. It was far worse than a simple case of battle burn. A simple meditech could not fix their pain. No amount of cajoling could bolster them into being whole once again. They were shipped off, if they survived their internal onslaughts. These broken beings became someone else's problem, not Sela's.

But this one *was* her problem.

Erelah shook her head and turned wet eyes up at her. "I can't make her stop."

Sela pocketed the shiv. "There's no one here, Erelah. Just you and me and your brother."

She is here and Valen is not. He was worth a dozen of her.

A part of her wanted to tell her to suck it up or rage at her, as she had done with those psych-damaged 'scriptors. If what Erelah suffered was all in her head, she could control that too.

But she resisted.

Instead she gripped the girl by the upper arms and urged her to her feet. "Come on. You should rest."

The girl came with her, compliant and weak as they stepped back out into the common passage. It was clearly dangerous to let her roam the ship alone. Sela guided her back to the storage space that served as Erelah's room.

It was not until the backs of the girl's knees hit the edge of the cot that she looked around, as if suddenly aware of the change in setting.

"Don't lock me up again!" She attempted to pull away.

Sela forced her back down.

She knelt down to her level, hands still gripping Erelah's arms. "Listen to me, Erelah. You have to fight this. If you are anything like Jon, you have the strength to do that. You have made it this far. You have survived nearly two years on your own. Do this for your brother, if you cannot do it for yourself."

She folded under a choking sob.

"Maintain, soldier. Am I clear?" She released her hold and straightened, standing over her.

Erelah swiped at her eyes. She opened her mouth as if to speak but then nodded ardently, like a child fearing a reprimand.

A bleating sound echoed down from the command loft.

What seemed like ages ago, Sela had programmed the nav-comp to alert her with course changes. She did not trust the flight computer, or more accurately, was not about to place blind faith in the contents of Phex's stellar nav charts.

There were quite a few things on this ship that she didn't trust. Even if the girl seemed calmer now, it was unwise to leave her unattended.

After one long judging stare, she turned to leave. "I'll wake the captain. He'll tend to you."

"No. Don't tell Jon." Erelah grabbed her sleeve. "Please."

Sela pulled away with an irritated grunt. The girl's theatrics now challenged the last of her patience.

"I know you don't trust me," Erelah said. "It's not your fault. It's how First made you." She looked up at Sela with queer solemnity. "But I know what you think."

As the met the girl's stare, Sela felt a sudden surge of heat. It prickled from the base of her skull and down her neck.

She took a step back, retreating to the threshold. There was something very wrong with Erelah Veradin. It was as if the girl bore some contaminant. Sela wanted no part of it.

"I am a danger. I am a liability. They should just retire me. Like any one of those battle-burned 'scriptors." The expression on the girl's face became stony. The meter and tone of her words drew out, became measured, precise. Her heavy Eugenes accent flattened into perfect Regimental. A chill rose on Sela's skin as she realized the girl was doing a nearly perfect imitation of her voice. "End me so I can harm no one. Retire me… like you did cadet Stelvick."

Stelvick.

Sela's heart flattened.

"What did you say?" she hissed. The hairs rose on the back of her neck. She had told no one. Ever. Not the drillers during the inquiry. Not the other booters in her cluster. And certainly not Jon. In fact, the story she had told him, though highly edited, was the only confession she had ever made about Atilio's conception.

Erelah sagged back to the cot. She dropped her head into her hands. Her mass of dark hair fell over her face.

"Now do you see?" she sobbed. "I'm hollow and stuffed full of other people. I open my mouth and someone else talks."

Sela stiffened. Her eyes began to water. "This is some trick. How do you know about Stelvick?"

Erelah shook her head. The lilting Eugenes accent was back when she spoke again: "You knew you had to be the one to stop him. The drillers wouldn't have cared. And when you did it, you were sad for him. It was the first time you had

ever killed. You never looked away. He slid down the wall. There was blood everywhere. You stayed and you watched… and you watched …until he stopped breathing. No one else was going to get hurt by him. You made sure–"

"Stop it." Sela backed away. This was impossible. *How could she know?*

Sela refused to believe in such fantasy as mind-readers and oracles. They were stories for children and entertainments on the holo-web. No one could delve into the mind of another and see their secrets.

Unheeding, Erelah continued to ramble. Her words were quick and pleading. "You can do what I can't. Kill me. Before it gets worse."

"Madness," Sela seethed, triggering the door shut just as Erelah opened her mouth to speak.

Without a backward glance, she made for the command loft to the call of the nagging nav-comp. Once the course correction was satisfied, she would wake Jon to deal with his sister.

28

/Retire you? As if Tyron would really do it/

The overwhelming surge of pressure in Erelah's head tightened until it felt as if her very skull would split and the thing that dwelled in there would crawl out of it. She doubled over, fingers digging into her scalp. It had taken all the control she could manage to keep Tristic at bay when Tyron was in the room. Now the beast redoubled her efforts. It was a thunderous onslaught, making all the others before seem weak taunts.

/Tyron. What an insufferable nuisance. What gall she possessed to think she could defeat me. Me!/

Erelah could not gather the strength to stand. Her jaw was clenched shut beneath the steady pounding of pressure-pain.

/You have not known agony until now. Your brother and his breeder will know it ten-fold./

She released a shuddering sob. Her vision blurred under the haze of tears.

Pulse thundering against her ears, she collapsed to her side on the deck.

With numb and tremulous fingers, she pulled the tiny vial from a pocket in her ruined jumpsuit. Tyron had probably never known it was in the medistat kit.

Xiocine. A common tincture. Healing if used carefully on a wound. Deadly if ingested.

Here was escape.

She had fantasized about this before: finding a rip in the skin of this world and slipping through.

"This time." Erelah realized she had spoken aloud. She looked up.

Tristic was gone.

The pressure in her skull had vanished. The beast's hold could only last so long. The harder Tristic pushed, the shorter her onslaught.

I don't know how much more I can take.

Tyron wouldn't stop her; she was busy in the command loft, wallowing in her own mire of self-loathing. Even if the soldier were in the very room, she would probably cheer Erelah on. Jonvelish likely slept under his aching mound of guilt.

Would he even surface to care?

Erelah swiped impatiently at her tear-streaked face then gingerly removed the vial's seal. The glass ticked against her teeth as her nervous fingers quivered. Her tongue recoiled with the taste of the first droplets. It was overpoweringly acrid.

"What are you doing?"

Jon's voice erupted as he darted through the doorway.

Quickly Erelah turned away, seeking to drink the remainder. His hand slapped the vial away. It landed with a tiny, unimportant tink! on the deck.

"What is that?" Jon demanded. His anger was undermined by the fear in his face. "Erelah?"

She tried to back away, pushing with weak legs along the floor. Her mouth. Her lungs had become lazy. Mist flooded the edges of her vision.

Would this little bit be enough? Please, Miri, granter of mercies. Let it be enough.

She soon had her answer as the black tide engulfed everything. And she gave herself over, gladly.

"Erelah?" His hands roughly seized shoulders that belonged to someone else. She watched more than felt.

Come on. Wake up!

His commanding voice was tinny, disconnected. Another unimportant tragedy being acted out somewhere else.

The black tide filled her mouth, nose. Covered her eyes. To the last, her ears were still buffeted by the unimportant sounds.

wakeup...erelah...ty!...getdownhere

The shouts of the far-away drillers carried in angry echoes against the walls of the maze-like bunkers in the kennel compound. Here all the walls looked the same, save for the large painted numbers that gave each place its name, and thus its level of importance and use. Just like the people there: drillers and hooters. Tightly shaved heads. Dark eyes in varying shades of carefully-bred Vingenes brown. Gray single suits with colors and designations over the breast that suggested

levels of importance and use. They all tended to look the same, sometimes even up close. The color of Sela's hair was a secret even from herself until her first assignment, when she was allowed to grow it out.

She was aware of other sounds too: the scrape of heavy boots, the rasp of wet labored breathing, the relentless pounding of her heart in her ears.

Stelvick looked different far away and close up. He was a towering beast. Except now, he looked smaller, deflated. In a sense, that was what was happening to him. He was deflating, a hole made in him, allowing what was within him to escape into a growing maroon puddle on the floor.

The same maroon, once slimy and warm, now cooled between her fingers and on the hilt of her combat knife. Sela had seen blood before, often her own, from times on the training mats, but this was not hers. This belonged to Stelvick.

He had collapsed against the wall, legs akimbo, back slumped under the large number designating their clusterbay. His chest heaved. His hand clutched at his neck, unable to staunch the flow of blood.

Sela squatted down, staring. Her eyes locked with his. Even silenced, he radiated hatred. A sneer always lingered beneath his surface. There was no wonder or surprise in his eyes. They contained a poisonous acceptance of the grim. As if somehow he knew that this had been his designated ending.

"My strength is the soldier beside me." Sela recited Decca. Perhaps then he would understand. This was a mercy. She did this for the others, her kennel mates, to protect them. She had removed this canker that would have weakened them as a group. And she was prepared to bear the punishment for it.

"Ty! Help me!"

Sela bolted upright in the grav bench, surroundings realigning against the memory.

Jon shouted once more. This time she could hear it from the vox panel in the wall and from the corridor below the command loft.

Sela climbed over the back of the grav couch and down the ladder to the common passage.

"Jon?"

"Here! In here!" It came from Erelah's room.

She turned the corner. Jon sat on the floor. Erelah was a limp shape draped across his arms. Her head flopped back lifelessly. Sela thought of the red welts Erelah had carved into her own arms. Perhaps one had gone too deep.

I should have woken him sooner. Not allowed the nav-comp to distract mr. Or permitted the self-indulgent review of memories best left hidden.

"What's happened?" But she did not step closer. Even now, she hesitated to touch the girl.

"I cannot wake her." His red-rimmed eyes pleaded up at Sela. "She drank something. There was a vial in her hand."

This was a mercy. Immediately she felt guilt at the tormented expression on Jon's face.

Erelah's breathing came in shallow gulps. Jon shook her. Her arm flopped.

Sela stepped closer, crouched, and heard the crunch of glass. She shifted her foot and looked. On the deck lay the shattered remains of a tiny black glass vial. She stiffened. Xiocine An anti-infective that could be fatal is ingested. It was one of the tincture ampules from the med kit that she had flung from the bunkroom under the spell of her temper. She had not bothered to reclaim it from the floor.

Jon looked at it, then up at Sela. The accusation was plain in his voice.

"Did she drink that? Was it that? What did she drink?"

A wave of icy heat paraded down her scalp. She was not going to be held responsible for this. If Erelah had truly wanted to end herself, she could have easily opened an artery with her makeshift shiv.

"Xiocine." Sela straightened. "From the medikit."

There is no way this is going to be my damn fault.

Jon's narrowed eyes told her otherwise. "How did she get that?"

Sela straightened. "I didn't give it to her."

"The damage is done," he muttered, holding Erelah's face in his hands.

Sela grabbed the Cass's depleted medikit from the storage locker nearby and threw it to the floor. After a frantic rummage through the pockets, she found it: the emetic.

"Here." She shoved the bottle into Jon's hand. "Make her drink this. It'll bring it up."

He looked down at the bottle and then up at her. Distrust. She had never seen distrust on his face.

"I didn't make her do this, Jon!" Kneeling, Sela roughly pulled back the sleeve of Erelah's arm. Maroon dotted the girl's skin in angry hashes. "She wants to destroy herself!"

His expression collapsed. "Help me."

"Get her mouth open."

With trembling fingers, Jon cradled that pale jaw and pried open her clenched teeth. Sela uncapped the bottle and poured its contents into the girl's mouth. Erelah bucked, pushing against Jon. He held her firmly, hand over her mouth.

"No, baby sister. Swallow it. Come on."

Erelah struggled against him. Finally she relented. Jon brought his hand away.

"Get her on her side," Sela instructed.

Jon turned her, stroking her back as she coughed and heaved.

"I don't think that was enough," he said. "She needs a real doctor, a medic."

Sela stood. "Searching the nav charts for something like that would take days. She may not have that long."

Considering its source in Phex, she had little reason to take what information she found there to be trustworthy without thorough investigation. There was simply no time for that.

"Think!" Jon cried. "There has to be something."

Sela inhaled sharply. "Lineao."

"What in the Known Worlds is Lineao?"

But she was running back along the command passage, already climbing the rungs up to the command loft.

She hoped that the priest had meant what he said about seeing her again, and about having to help those in need. There were no other options. Collapsing into the grav couch, Sela pulled the navsys up and found the redirect for the next flex point. It would take half a day, but it was all they had: Tasemar.

29

Tasemar, specifically this sparse little town clinging to the edges of the ruined government complex installed by the Regime, was not as Sela had left it. Remarkably, it had become a thriving epicenter, full of life.

Where had all these souls been when my team was fighting its way up hill? Cowering in their homes?

In the market at the base of the hill, Sela received immediate answers regarding the priest. Lineao was well known, having become something of a local legend. The story the merchant told her was of a priest that had stood firm in faith and guarded the Temple of the Miseries. Under different, less desperate circumstances, she would have chuckled at the name. It was apt in so many ways. No one seemed to mention the bloody state in which her team had left it. Or that Lineao had been more prisoner than protector. She was not about to correct this revisionist history.

"Are you sure this priest will help?" Jon asked. He righted his stance and adjusted his hold on Erelah's body. "You did not exactly part on the best of terms."

Where once protocol would have dictated they use Regimental, they employed Commonspeak within earshot of the crowds of Tasemarin that now filled the streets and passages.

"We have to try. This is the best chance she has." Sela studied the press of bodies. She gestured in the direction of Lineao's temple at the crest of the hill. They fell in with the foot traffic making its way there, Sela trying her best to part the crowds as Jon followed in her wake, carrying Erelah.

Once more, she found herself leading a frenzied hike up the hill. To Sela, the cracked stone path riddled with dry weeds had seemed so much steeper, treacherous on her first arrival here with her team. It had been abandoned then.

Now the Tasemarin packed the passages with a near-frenzied joy. First had declared this place renegade, not worth the expenditure of resources to reclaim it, she learned.

There was singing, excited chanting. Banners fluttered from windows. Children scampered among the crowd. Merchants sold goods from carts and rugs spread out on the walkway under the blinding dwarf suns.

They reached an open square, some kind of town common that had once marked the entrance to the government complex her team had been sent to secure. The crowd swelled there. Their shouts and chanting seemed angrier. She caught glimpses through the press of bodies: a burning Regimental standard cast upon a pile of rubble. A corpse tied to a post, dressed in a dark gray uniform very much like one she used to own.

She quickly looked away, tamping down a strange, untethered feeling.

My son died for this.

Lineao was not hard to find. As their ragged party crested the hill, she spotted him speaking to an old woman, laughing. He seemed taller, less frail than during their first encounter, but his dingy brown robes were unchanged. When he saw Sela approach, the mirth evaporated from his face. His expression was stony but unsurprised as he looked from Sela to Erelah's limp form.

Before she could speak, Jon strode forward. "Help her. Please."

Lineao did not hesitate. He nodded, ushering them into the dark cool of the temple. Jon followed, bearing Erelah like an offering. But at the heavy iron-clad door, Sela paused. Somewhere in that dimness lay the altar room where her son had died, a place she had hoped to never see again.

For the first time in her life, Sela considered prayer. If her mind could frame the silent wishes sent to invisible beings stupid enough to take interest in the daily affairs of her existence, her wish would be to become a blissfully ignorant soldier once more. She wanted to be like these grimy-faced people in the streets shouting and singing, blind to their coming end, uncaring of the worlds beyond.

"Ty?" Jon turned, blinking out at her from the shade.

Sela took one last look around the blinding yellow sunlight of the courtyard, the crowd beyond. Then she followed Jon inside.

The door shut behind them with a solid thud. Sela suppressed a shiver despite the heat. None of the street noise carried on the warm, dry air. Instead the distant sound of chanting came from unseen rooms. Compared to the brilliance outside, the corridor was a dark cavern. Shafts of light from high windows plunged square pillars into shadow.

"Sarrid! Wake up!" Lineao plowed forward with hurried strides, as they followed his wake.

A small shadow unfolded from an alcove, took the shape of a young boy. Without breaking stride, the priest issued a rushed series of commands in Tasemarin to the boy, who then scampered off on his mission.

A cool tickle of sweat ran between her shoulder blades. They passed the ornate carved door that led to the main altar chamber where Atilio had died. It took everything in her power to keep her gaze forward.

Jon stumbled, resettling Erelah's limp frame in his arms before Sela could help him.

"In here. Quickly." Lineao stopped at a curtained doorway and held aside the heavy drapery.

Her captain did not hesitate and lunged inside. Nothing else existed to him. It was written in the desperate set of his jaw.

Sela paused and met Lineao's eyes. "I was your enemy. Not him. Not her. If you need to tell your brothers about me being Regime, it's just me. Got it?"

He shook his head slowly. There was a hint of disappointment in his voice. "I see only pilgrims in need of help, like so many others. You are safe here. You have my word."

The tension in her spine loosened only slightly.

"Wait here. I will return with others that can help."

The morning stretched into midday. Sela imagined that outside, the sunbaked streets would be empty as the Tasemarin avoided the powerful suns. But this was proven false by the sounds of the bustling outside world occasionally carried in with the comings and goings of the temple priests.

Sela sat alone on the stone floor of the hall outside Erelah's sickroom and leaned against the wall. Flanked by squares of light reflected from the windows high above, she judged the passing of time by watching their slow progress across the floor.

The waiting had given her time to consider the costly leap of faith she had committed to help Jon and Erelah. She had acted in desperation. Even if Lineao could keep their presence secret, there was no guarantee they were completely safe. It was quite possible there was some level of Regime interest in this region, even if they had completely withdrawn from Tasemar. Alternatively there were those Tasemarin not so content with the Regime's miraculous departure, who might seek revenge. In either scenario, this was not the time or place to adopt a relaxed posture.

"They made me leave. I think I was getting in their way."

She looked up to see Jon. He slid down the wall to sit beside her, legs stretching into the middle of the corridor. Listing, he came to rest against her shoulder.

Sela turned to look at the curtained doorway. "Is she any better?"

"She *looks* better." His voice was muffled against the fabric of her sleeve.

"You need to rest, Jon…"

He righted himself. His answer was sharp. "I'll rest when I know Erelah will be all right."

Jon shut his eyes and tilted his head back to the wall. He was still for so long that she thought perhaps he had fallen asleep. But then he spoke again, his voice hoarse.

"What did I do wrong? How did I not see this coming?"

She regarded his profile. "We allowed… personal indulgences to distract us."

"What?" He looked at her, brow furrowed. "You mean she did this because we had sex?"

Sela grunted, irritated by the sarcasm she heard in his voice. "That's not what I meant and you know it."

"Apparently not. Tell me what I know, please." He angled away from the wall to face her.

"Lord Veradin?"

They turned. In the doorway stood a young boy, no older than ten, head shaven and thin body covered in a simple brown tunic. Something about his appearance made Sela think of the meek, silent Fleet techs on the *Storm King*. This was the boy Lineao had summoned, Sarrid.

Jon stood, their newly-forming argument seeming forgotten. "What is it?"

Sarrid took a timid step back. "The brothers say you should come back in."

30

Around her, Erelah was aware of shapes moving. They spoke in low serious voices. None of it she could discern. It was about her, of course, nothing she would want to hear. Her eyelids felt so heavy. Opening them took a great deal of concentration.

But what she did glimpse was a space filled with the mellow amber light of glow spheres. The lines here were soft and imperfect. Earthen walls surrounded them. There was not a glint of metal to be seen. If there were a world opposite to the endless series of medsuites and labs of her time with Tristic, this was it. Those rooms had been cold, sterile and she never felt warm in them. Here the warmth was comforting and seemed to soak into every aching inch of her body.

One of the shapes loomed closer. She wanted to curl back into the soft cushions that cradled her, but found her strength was gone. The shape coalesced into a broad set of shoulders, dark hair. A strong hand gripped hers. Jon.

Even in this state, half awake, half aware, she steeled herself against the flood of images. But this time there was no onslaught. Instead it was a thin eddy of emotion rolling from him: a mix of relief, untwisting anxiety. A brief echo of an argument with Ty that was now a firm knot of regret.

And with that the crushing thought: *I wanted to be dead. I was supposed to be dead.*

"Erelah?" His voice sounded just as battered as she felt.

Her tongue felt too thick. "What…is this place?"

He ran a smoothing hand over her hair. "Shhh… Rest."

She forced herself to focus on him. Unshaven. Slept-in clothing. Darkened eyes.

All because of me.

"I'm sorry." She managed a dry whisper. "I couldn't fight it."

"They tell me you're through the worst. You're going to be alright."

That thought should bring relief.

And that was when she felt the thing stir. It stretched from its dark nest. With that came a wave of coldness that the warmth of this place could not overcome. The now familiar pressure/pain wedged into her skull.

"What did you do?" Erelah heard a voice rasp.

She realized it was her own.

Her hand locked down on Jon's. The strength that came to her was not her own. It came from afar. From *her*. Tristic.

Pain flashed across his face. Jon pulled his hand free. "Calm down."

Tristic must have been waiting, standing ready to crawl through that soft place in her mind and take over.

Erelah watched what she did next as a bystander in her own body. She was as flimsy as a shadow.

"Where have you taken her? I demand you return her to me." She climbed from the bed on legs that felt hollow, unreal. Her muscles burned with cramping pain. But it was all happening to something else.

Tristic filled her now, moving from within to glare out on the room.

"Return you? Where?" This was a new voice challenging.

Erelah's head pivoted around to follow it.

Tyron.

Arms folded and with an imposing weapon holstered at her hip, Veradin's breeder glowered from the doorway. An incredible example of selective breeding. Such a shame it would be to destroy her.

/If only to inhabit a body like that…such strength./

"I understand your sergeant expired, Commander. 'Glory all,' I believe is the correct sentiment." Erelah felt her mouth twitch into a mocking grin.

"Erelah? What are you doing?" Veradin demanded.

Moves rigid, Erelah turned back. The brother. Always the brother. The insufferable guilt-ridden expression on his hatefully perfect features. As if all manner of ills the Known Worlds could visit upon their cursed party were specifically designed by his actions. As if a simple mortal could command such influence.

Yet the brother's words seemed to trigger something. Tristic felt the squirming twitch of her will, fading but still willing to struggle. The girl was fighting her now.

The image of a beach beneath a pale blue sky came to him. Then a crumbling temple, vine-covered and abandoned. Hands, impossibly large and strong. Helio's, as they walked along the shoreline.

With a shake of the head, the images dissolved. However weak, they were a costly distraction.

Tyron said. "This is for Valen."

Erelah's head turned in time to see a blur of motion. Then the powerful collision of Tyron's fist with her jaw.

There was a white snap of pain and the world flattened once more.

"I didn't see any other choice," Sela said. It was as close to an apology as she was willing to step. She placed a hand on Jon's shoulder as he leaned over his sister. The girl's skin held the plastic sheen of sweat. Her hair was a wild mass of dark vines.

"Do we really have to tie her down?" he asked across his sister's still body. Although her breathing was deep and regular, she had not stirred since Sela's punch had ended the unnerving transformation.

Sela sank back on her haunches. "Jon, it's for her safety."

"Lord Veradin."

Lineao arrived in a breathless swirl of robes. The boy must have gone to find him. He edged Jon out of the way and leaned down over Erelah. He brushed arrant strands of hair from her face. Gently, he pried open one of her eyelids. Sela watched his expression sober.

"Quickly," he said, turning to Sarrid. "Summon brother Liri."

The boy darted from the room, his expression of relief obvious. Anything to be free of the raging lunatic girl tied down to a cot. For a fleeting moment, Sela envied him.

"What? What is it?" Jon said, standing to face the priest.

"You must be honest in your answer to my next question, Veradin," Lineao said. "Although I fear I already know the answer."

Sela tensed. Lineao turned his back on her, his full attention on Jon.

"Are you Human? Is this female—"

"She's my sister." An edge of defensiveness to Jon's reply.

"Your sister. Is she Human as well?"

Jon looked at Sela over Lineao's shoulder.

She gave him the slightest of nods. *What choice do we have?*

Jon released a pent-up breath. "Yes."

The two other priests in earshot turned to each other in silent astonishment. They made some ritualized gesture with their hands. The one closest to the depiction of Miri genuflected in the painting's direction.

Sela heard him whisper: "Poor child. The poison would have been a mercy."

Lineao regarded Erelah. In profile, the man looked older, haggard. His mouth compressed into a thoughtful frown.

"I must make preparations." With that, Lineao turned for the doorway. Sela grabbed a handful of his robe, stopping him.

"You gave me your word. You said they're safe here," she hissed.

"They are. You are." He carefully pried her hand away. "Brother Liri may be able to help the girl. Pray it is not too late."

"Too late for what?" Jon demanded. "What's going on?"

The priest regarded him. The pity was plain in his voice. "I have only seen this once before. A Trelgin whose mind had been invaded by a Sceeloid. Long ago during the conquering of Hedas."

Sela felt her mouth go dry. "You mean sight-jacked."

Lineao nodded. "When the host resists, it makes the damage worse. It twists their perception. Existence becomes torture. If anyone can sever the link and end this, it will be Liri."

"This is her salvation?" Sela sneered. She stood between the priest and her captain. Unaware of the motion, her hand traveled to rest on the grip of the A6 in its holster.

She studied the creature that had been introduced to them as Brother Liri. The hunched shoulders beneath the ragged brown cloth of the hood. The pale scaly skin, veined in deep blue, the milky white eyes that by all rights should be blind, yet somehow appeared to take in everything. Long bony hands ending in curved thick nails that looked like alabaster hooks. Needle sharp teeth hosted by pale gums.

Sela had fought Sceeloid soldiers before in her career: they were slinking, sinewy adversaries of immense strength. This one was ancient, seeming carved out of dust and decay.

"Ty. Stand down."

"He's a Sceeloid. You can't trust them."

"He would say the same of you, Commander." Lineao inserted himself. "Brother Liri has known no other life than this temple. He was rescued as a youngling, left to die. He has spent his life in service to our Order."

"Fear not, soldier. I am not your enemy," Liri said.

The deep rumbling voice stirred a wave of revulsion in her stomach.

"I have come to ease the suffering. It is my service to the Fates. It is my duty to use my gifts in their service and aid where I must. Time is short."

"Stand down." Jon repeated. His hands gripped her shoulders.

"Captain?" She turned her head slightly, reluctant to take her gaze from Liri.

"You heard me." He spoke against her neck. His hand trailed down her arm, guiding the weapon back to its holster.

Lineao took advantage of this momentary truce and helped the hobbled figure to Erelah's bedside.

Sela turned to face Jon.

"I'm making this choice for her," he said, his brown eyes serious. "My call."

31

The first of the dwarf suns was melting into the distant dry mountains when Lineao found Sela in the altar room. She sat on the same low bench with her back pressed against the wall. A nearly empty bottle of scorch-rum was propped between her knees. The boy, Sarrid, had been useful in that sense.

Uninvited, the priest sank to the seat beside her. Time turned back on itself, a serpent eating its own tail. The altar cloth was an ugly mustard color that Sela found out of place. Either it was new or someone had carefully washed Atilio's blood from it. But the suffocating forgiveness of the three Fates still radiated from the wall. The holoplaz roof once more revealed the purpled night sky. This time no *Storm King* sailed there. And Atilio was long gone.

She forced down another swig from the bottle before holding it out to Lineao. Surprisingly, he took a long pull from it, grimaced.

"One forgets the taste of such things after so long." Then handed the bottle back like a firm regret.

She wanted to be drunk.

It was a foreign concept, one she had found appealing at first, but now, on this side of it, not worth the effort. As a breeder, her body metabolized the intoxicant differently by design. Regardless, she took another swallow, mechanical and determined. Her eyes burned and watered at the taste.

She waited for Lineao to mutter platitudes and offer prayers. Instead he merely sat beside her, gazing out over the room. Yellow light from dozens of tiny clay lamps flickered against the walls like damaged ghosts. The quiet felt like a pretense, as if at any moment there would be a sudden violent explosion of noise and activity. The longer she waited, the longer nothing happened. She recognized the unease for what it was: *battle burn*. Going for so long without real rest and

under near constant threat, it was only apparent to her now in the peaceful aftermath.

Outside, the village was settling in for the night. The Tasemarin were saving their strength for more vacuous freedom worship, she guessed. This settlement's name was *Macula*, in the sing-song Tasemarin tongue. She had only ever known it by coordinates and proximity to the government complex her team had originally been sent to secure. When Sela heard it for the first time, she nearly laughed. It sounded very much like the word for stain in Commonspeak. *Stain. how appropriate.*

She stared unfocused into the dim room of mottled light and shadows. "You keep a lot of secrets here."

"Secrets can protect or hurt, Tyron. Do not pretend that this is new knowledge to you."

She snorted derisively. "Those things you told me, Lineao, about me being different. Did you mean them? Were they the truth?"

"You would not be here, now, if it were not so."

"That's not really an answer."

He shifted beside her on the bench.

"Belief is not weakness, Tyron."

"No matter how much you *believe* in something doesn't make it true or right. Belief doesn't change the facts."

"You believe that you are fighting for the right things. You believe in your strength and in the character of this man, Veradin. Is that not so?"

She took another pull at the bottle. Swallow. Burn. Then "And what if you're believing in the wrong things?"

"Everyone must find their own truth."

She took another swallow. "I don't like the way it tastes."

He pried the bottle from her hands and set it down at his feet, then rose. "Regardless of the truths you have discovered about the man you worship, he still needs you."

She looked away with a disgusted sound. "Unlikely."

"That is why the Fates placed you there for him," Lineao said solemnly.

"He is too close to see it, but this is a vulnerability. We do irrational things… because of each other. Because our feelings blind us." Sela stood, a little unevenly. The room felt too warm suddenly. "He is safer without me."

Lineao crowded her between the bench and wall, a mistake for anyone. "This is your duty, if you see it or not, Commander."

"Stop it." Sela leveled her hand on his chest, as much to push him back as to steady herself. The buoyant drunken haze was evaporating, exposing the too-familiar jagged surface beneath.

"You come here, to this room, just like any other that seeks answers. Soldier or not, you are all the same in the eyes of the Fates. Your heart is bare to them and they see all. You wonder if the choice you have made was the right Path. You question your actions. You wonder if your love for this man is misguided."

Gone was the gentle teacher, the patient listener. He was more like a driller pressing close, his face inches away.

"I don't… I'm not…" she stammered. The denial was there, an easy response. Then the anger welled up, always within reach. This time she shoved him more firmly. "I'm not one of them. I'm not *like* them."

"True or not, you share his Path now." Lineao allowed himself to be moved back. It did not stem the flow of his speech. "Stand with him. Give him your strength."

"Enough." Her echo rang in the round chamber like an angry chant. "It is a vulnerability we cannot afford."

"Do not tell me you fear *this*? After all that you have faced! You fear this simple and pure thing. You fear this *gift*."

She gave a long shuddering breath. "Yes."

"Finally." His smile was slender. "Welcome to the Worlds, Citizen."

This is what it is like to stride between worlds, feet firmly planted on opposite sides of the diaphanous scrim of real/unreal.

Erelah pictured a giant, hands on hips, facing the void and stepping on two globes.

The thought was queer, uncomfortable. She laughed, a nervous buzzing between her ears.

/Serious. This is serious, child./

And she was aware of a grave presence, alien, but not unwelcome like Tristic. Just *other.*

/Calm. Focus on me, my words./

Erelah was being gathered up, patiently. It was easy to picture her fractured pieces lying scattered across a bleak expanse. In careful order, these pieces were being rejoined. The hands that did this were gnarled and ancient, covered with

scaled white skin. In strange duplicity, these hands also pressed against either side of her head. Eyes closed, she felt this being pressing down against her forehead.

Normally she would have found this suffocating. She hated the sensation of being held down. Her focus drifted. The urge to fidget and squirm pulled at her.

/Still, child./

The Sceeloid. Liri. That was the owner of the hands, the voice.

He had entered with the priest, Lineao. They made the offer with a strange firmness, the way a physician proposes the only treatment available as if it were a choice when, in the end, there is no other.

/Focus. Here, with me. Do not fear./

The awareness of the room, the dry perfumed air dissolved. There was fuller blackness. She knew immediately where he was pulling her. And her fear surged.

/No fear./

The clawed panic receded into her chest, nestling down, unwilling to slink away entirely. But it did obey, one rheumy eye peering out with distrust.

The room seemed so much taller, the ceiling disappeared into dark far overhead. Her footfalls were silent on the high polish of the floor like black ice. There far at the edge of the weakling light sat the evil queen in her throne.

Tristic. She seemed larger with her stooped shoulders towering over Erelah. The mouth stretched wide and cruel into a smile of cragged teeth.

/Intriguing. You come to me, then, lovely girl./

Panic sprang up within her, back arched. Ready to thrash wickedly.

/Stay. Be still. She is but a shade. Powerless./

She calmed.

A black chuckle, damning.

/You employ a simple mystic to combat me*?/*

And Tristic was stalking about her, circling her prey.

/End this nonsense. Return to me./

Erelah was aware of something tugging at her just beyond the threshold of sensation. The roots and vines of that alien place in her head withered, shriveling. Somewhere Liri was working her free of that poison soil. Now she understood. As Erelah occupied the beast in defense of its lair, the priest had stolen past to destroy her nest.

/You were meant for this, Veradin./

Desperation crept into Tristic's tone.

She lunged at Erelah. But the shade could only pass through her. Cheated, it hissed in a winded rush.

/You think this saves you? I see all, regardless of this country mystic and his simple tricks./

Tristic was collapsing, folding within as if the very bones of her skull were breaking down. Her hand hooked against Erelah's shoulder, seeking to rend and tear. But it held no more weight than a phantom breeze. The evil queen crumbled to her knees, staggered by an invisible weight.

/You are mine, Veradin. This does not end things./

Dark blood wet the corners of her mouth. For each ragged breath she uttered, Erelah felt something within her surge, an energy, a buoyancy long forgotten. This was mine, she thought. This belonged to me.

She sat up.

Her lungs unfolded against the liquid heaviness that sought to drown her. Blindly she rolled onto her side as a fit of coughing racked her body. Dimly she was aware of the taste of blood.

Was this another dream?

She peered about the vaguely familiar room, thoughts slowly clearing.

Liri withdrew, pulling his hands into the cuffs of his long robe. The hood covered his rough wide features. The shadow it cast made it impossible to see his eyes.

"Gone." Erelah breathed. "Tristic is gone."

The hooded head bobbed. But the priest did not speak.

A row of candles lined the wall. Twisted ropes of sabet vines hung along the walls. The warm, humid air was rich with their scent. Nearby, Erelah could hear the low, grinding chant of priests in a prayer to Miri. It was one she had not heard since her childhood on Argos.

Memory returned in a rushing wave: The tiny vial dashed to the floor. Jon's angry voice, tempered with fear. Hands moving over her, prying open her jaw. Some cloying sweet fluid.

Then the pieces fell back into place. This was the Temple of Miseries. A *sacerdos* named Lineao had told her most of it. They had helped pull her from the brink of something terrible.

"The being, Tristic, has been thwarted. I have severed her connection with you. I fear she will persist. Her desire to reclaim you is strong, child," Liri said. His voice seemed weaker to Erelah, his breathing labored. She watched him lean back into the wooden bench beside her. His gnarled hands rested over the top of a cane that looked just as old and twisted as he.

"The half-breed is clever and relentless. She is obsessed with the thought that you are her salvation even as she succumbs to decay. Nothing shall deter her from claiming you, save her death."

"Do you think she can find me here?" she asked.

"It is quite possible. Quite possible," Liri replied. "I do not doubt her resourcefulness."

Erelah bit her lip, afraid to ask the question that worried her. Does this mean the Sight was gone? Did she still have to fear the touch of others?

As if guessing her thoughts, Liri turned his milky white gaze on her. "The spark of Sight has always dwelled within you, as it does in any of the Miri's children. Yet, in you, child, it is stronger. Certainly you have felt its influence. A lucky guess here or there… meeting someone for the first time, yet feeling as if you have known them forever. It was meant to help guide your Path, unseen. It was certainly never meant to be changed as it has in you."

He paused. "But this abomination… Tristic... has interfered. Whatever changes she made to you, has forced to the surface your glimmer of Sight, making it burn brighter than Miri had ever intended."

Erelah frowned, shaking her head. "But I don't want it."

"What you desire, child, matters not. It shall remain a part of you. And grow stronger still." The gentleness in his tone faded. "And now, a warning. You must learn to control it. Be careful with whom you come into contact. If you must use your Sight on another, be wise. For that other becomes of you. In that moment you become them, take from them memories and their… essence. I sense that you have already experienced this, no?"

Erelah nodded, swallowing. "By accident. I didn't know."

"Too much can overwhelm. Be careful, young one. The Sight you possess can possess you."

"Will I always be like this?"

"So many questions." Liri reached down tapped her beneath the chin, dismissive. "There's a good child. Rest now. Your Path stretches long and far from here. And you have much yet to do."

The heavy fabric curtains of the doorway parted. Erelah saw Jon pause there, uncertain if he should come any closer.

She nodded slightly as if to answer his silent question.

"This old body tires." Liri released a weary groan as he rose, leaning heavily on the cane. "Lineao, come boy. Help this one back to his chamber."

"I'm Sarrid, Master Liri." The young boy left his seat on the floor and stood at the Sceeloid's elbow.

"Ah. Right. Over time the mind forgets such tedium as names. Help me, boy." Liri placed a hand on Sarrid's shoulder, the other gripping the cane. The two began a slow, careful shuffle to the doorway.

She watched as her brother stepped aside, allowing them to disappear through the curtains.

Jon gave her a questioning look. Erelah looked away sharply, uncertain of how to describe what had just transpired.

He plopped next to her in the thick layers of pillows of her pallet. She did not need Tristic's gift to sense his near exhaustion.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Real. This feels… *real.* Solid."

It was the best word.

Until now, it was as if Erelah had been a ghost, drifting through the worlds untethered. This was the most solid she felt in a very long time. She felt real and actually in control. Things seemed focused.

Muscles ached as if she had been running for days. But it was a good soreness, reinforcing that sense of being whole. Her fear, once a constant companion, had become a blur on a dim horizon. She felt *safe.* That odd pressure in her head, the dank place where Tristic had once thrived, seemed fuzzy and drained.

When Jon smiled, his expression seemed lost. "You had me so scared."

"I'm sorry." She looked down, tracing an intricate woven pattern in the bedclothes. "I wasn't in control. The things she made me say… do. I'm so sorry. Jon, I don't expect you to understand. You thought I was mad and I guess I was. That is what Tristic did to me."

"Tell me she's gone for good."

She nodded. "Gone for good."

Jon crushed her in a sudden fierce embrace.

Erelah gently pushed him back. "As long as Tristic is alive, Jon, I'm not safe. And if you are with me, you're not either."

His hands settled on her forearms. "Then we run. We keep running until she's dead. Ty was right. We can wait Tristic out in the Reaches where she can't touch you. I've found a system called Hadelia. There's a large Eugenes population. It'll be easy to blend in—"

"You still don't get it, do you? What makes you think she won't follow us there?" she said. "She has the plans to the j-drive. Think of it, vessels that can

travel anywhere with no reliance for flex points. And not just strykers. Carriers. Freighters. If she's not done it already, she soon will."

"Then what? What are you saying?" He sat back on his haunches.

"We end this all. Now. On our terms."

"How, Erelah?" His expression was a mix of frustration and astonishment. "We have one ship, a busted antique at that."

"Two ships," she corrected. "We have the *Jocosta*."

"Are you listening to yourself? One stryker against Ravstar. That's just—"

She sighed, irritated. "Hear me out."

"No," he rose, turning for the doorway. "We're going into the Reaches. Just as soon as you're good to travel. In this you don't get a say. You're in no condition to make a decision like that."

"Jon, please listen." She sat up from the bedding. Perhaps she stood too quickly. The room began to tilt as she took an unsteady step forward. Jon caught her just as her knees folded.

"See?" he admonished. "You want to go on the offensive and you can barely make it across the room." He settled her back on the bed. "Get some rest, baby sister. We have some traveling to do."

Erelah watched him stride from the room.

"Forgive me, Jon. But I tried," she said under her breath.

32

Sela paced the small room Lineao had provided for sleeping quarters. Not long ago, he had appeared with his message: Erelah had recovered. The Sceeloid had succeeded in ending Tristic's possession.

She received this news with bitter relief. It had been easy to heal the girl, but Atilio had never benefited from the same attention.

Where was Lineao's convenient healing Sceeloid then?

A tepid guilt came just as quickly on the tail of that thought.

It is done. Now Jon will have his sister.

It made Sela's decision that much easier.

"She's going to be all right," Jon announced from the doorway.

She looked up and he was suddenly next to her, pulling her into a warm embrace.

"Yes. Lineao told me."

His hands slipped down to rest on her hips. He spoke in an elated rush. "She's good. I mean. She's a little beat up, but back to normal. Thank you."

Before she could react, he gathered another lingering kiss. Under it she felt her resolve begin to melt.

She maneuvered out of his embrace. "For what? Returning us to hostile territory? Or having you divulge an identity that is best hidden?"

"Well. Since you put it that way. All of it I guess," he said with a low chuckle. It sounded so normal. It was the sound of old things that could never return to them.

"You thought to come here. It was genius." He stepped closer. His hands slipped under the hem of her jacket and settled with distracting warmth against her waist.

She was very much aware of the soft slope of the bed at the back of her knees.

No. That *wasn't going to happen again.*

"It was a tactical risk that paid off," she said, pulling away. "We were fortunate."

"Fates, I love it when you act terse and practical." He cocked his head, hands on his hips. "It turns me on."

Sela frowned, realizing his sarcasm.

"What's going on? Talk to me."

"How long do Humans live, Jon? Do you know?"

"What?" he exhaled, irritation growing. "I don't know. Ninety years maybe."

"Eugenes live to be twice that, unaltered. My metabolism was engineered to replace my cells more efficiently to facilitate healing. If I were not a soldier, I could live to be two hundred, perhaps."

"So?" He moved closer. "You honestly think that either of us will even make it to ninety? We'll be lucky to make it next year."

"That's not what I'm trying to say."

"Then let's hear it."

"I'm afraid," she said. "No… I'm terrified."

"And you think I'm not?" he countered. "That doesn't change how I feel about you. I love you."

"Don't say that. You don't get to say that. *Not to me*," she said, suddenly furious. "Can't you see? What purpose would it serve but disaster? I loved my son. I watched him die. I could do nothing to save him. I loved my friend. And he is gone too. And you? How can I keep you safe when I failed so many already? I could not bear to lose you."

He pulled her to him. The move was forceful, urgent. He leaned his forehead against hers. "Sela, I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, or five minutes from now. But you're not responsible for me. How can I make you understand?"

"You are my vulnerability. My weakness. And I am yours. How can you actually believe we could survive that?"

He had to see that. They both acted irrationally where the other was concerned.

"We can try," he offered. "Please."

She stepped back and shook her head. "This… us… whatever it is. It can't happen anymore. There is too much at stake. It can't continue… not like this."

It had been impossible for Sela to sleep. Her last encounter with Jon replayed in the annoying clarity of her memory. In the middle of the night she found herself in the empty courtyard. A dry wind from the desert kicked up, blowing sparks from the torches into the air. She watched the dance of these embers as they were lofted on the winds and snuffed out.

She heard the crunch of pebbles underfoot near the weathered pagoda that marked the yard's entrance. The sounds were careless and loud. This was no one with training for stealth. A slender dark shape disengaged from the shadows. A civilian. Perhaps one of the monks. But definitely no one that had business in this space at night.

Sela tensed, her hand settling on the A6. She snapped the fastener open on its holster.

The figure reached the center of the courtyard. The light of the sputtering torches carved the graceful arc of pale shoulder under long dark hair.

She released an irritated sigh. Erelah.

A secret part of Sela wished it had been Jon. She forced the thought away.

"Commander Tyron?" Erelah called out. The girl turned, scanning the courtyard.

Sela retreated into the shadows, certain the girl had not discovered her. She toyed with the idea of waiting her out. She was in no danger of being observed. The night was moonless. The light of the torches did not reach this far.

"Commander? Are you out here?"

Sela rolled her eyes. *Why did the smartest people seem to lack common sense?*

Not the best way to keep your presence secret when essentially a whole planet had declared the Regime an enemy. She doubted the Tasemarin would discern between some renegade cresters and the enemy they represented.

"Keep your voice down," Sela said in a normal tone. "Not everyone here is your ally."

Erelah startled, turning to face Sela's black corner of the yard.

She disengaged from her spot and strode forward, ignoring the itch between her shoulder blades that open spaces like this seemed to provoke. It was as if there were a marksman hovering nearby, real or imagined, with his sights on that

very spot, ready to pull the trigger. More evidence of battle burn. Even when there was no threat, you still imagined it.

As Erelah moved toward her, Sela was struck by the dramatic change in the girl.

The once-tangled dark hair was arranged into a tight plait at the base of her neck. Distress no longer pinched the younger woman's face. Her posture seemed formal, almost regal.

This was a different person entirely. Except for the borrowed Tasmarin garb, she could have been any high-ranking Regime officer, cool and polished. Had she not known Erelah's true nature, she would have obeyed her orders without pause, and perhaps even regarded her with envy.

At that moment, Sela understood why First thought Humans to be such a threat. They were the narrow end of the wedge. They looked and sounded like any Eugenes. But a weakness dwelled within them to be exploited by the Sceeloid. Just one sight-jacked Human infiltrator in command would mean the end to a campaign. An entire battlegroup could be compromised.

"I was afraid you left had left, Commander."

"Shouldn't you be resting?" Sela asked, studying her. Erelah seemed to radiate control. But beneath it was an edginess. The girl would never seek her out for a social visit. She wanted something.

"There's no time for that. I think you would agree," Erelah responded in Commonspeak under her arched High Eugenes accent. This was someone used to giving orders to servants and attendants. It brought an acrid roil to Sela's gut. Her captain had been raised in the same house, but he had never used Erelah's imperious tone. He spoke with ease in Common, not Erelah's strained pretense: a high-born deigning to speak in a gutter tongue.

"Would I?" Sela replied. "You reading *my* mind now?"

"No." Erelah faltered. "That's not what I meant…"

"You want something. What." Sela moved closer in an unconscious move to intimidate. Oddly, the girl seemed taller than she recalled.

"Only for you to hear me out." To her surprise, Erelah stepped closer, challenging. The frenetic, unbalanced energy was gone. Where had that wild-looking wraith gone? Was she wedged somewhere beneath this refined surface, scratching and pawing for freedom? Sela fought the urge to take a wary step back. Instead she turned her body at an angle, rested her forearm on the grip of the A6.

"You have every right to feel betrayed and angry considering everything that has happened. We have all lost so much."

"Lost?" Sela spat. "Do you *know* what I have lost?"

Erelah recoiled. The move was slight, but still satisfying. In response, Sela drew closer.

"Valen, Pollus. Sergeant. Medals for valor, marksmanship. Six campaigns with him. My only friend. And dead because of *you*."

"I did not take your sergeant's life," Erelah replied evenly.

"All the same. He died for you." Sela jabbed a finger into the girl's shoulder. She allowed herself to be jostled, but held firm.

"Not for me," Erelah answered. "To the Defensor, he was another tool, a piece at play in her game. A means to manipulate."

"I don't think this is a game."

"To the Defensor, it is. You, Jon, and your sergeant. All parts of a game." Her tone was matter of fact.

"Oh? Then what does that make *you*?" Sela countered, willing her to look away. To her credit Erelah did not.

"I am the prize, the end game. Through me, she can live on, cheat death to recreate herself again and again."

"How?"

"Why stop with just me when I am capable of bringing more life?" Her gaze drifted to the gravel at her feet. She folded her arms over her stomach. And Sela felt a glimmer of pity for her as she imagined some bizarre gestation Tristic had planned for the girl. No one deserved that. Perhaps the girl had suffered the presence of a truer monster than ever Stelvick had been.

"I don't expect your forgiveness or pity. Nor do I deserve it," Erelah said with a steely evenness. "But Jon…he needs you. He—"

"You said you wanted something. What." Jon. His name was a rusty hook in Sela's heart. Pulling away would drag out the damage and pain, just as much as allowing it to stay in place. She stood at a precipice, unable to pick which pain to serve.

Erelah moved closer, the way one approaches an unfamiliar animal, uncertain if it will bite or sting. "I come to you as an ally. And to ask your help."

"Tristic."

The girl flinched at the name, as if speaking it aloud would conjure a poisonous god. "Even without her bond to me, she can still find me. She has eyes and ears everywhere. She controls her own army, her own fleet. She won't stop until one of us is destroyed. But, Tyron, *we* can fix this. *We* can defeat her."

Sela swelled with rage at the very suggestion in the girl's condescending Eugenes accent that they were somehow co-conspirators in this whole bloody adventure.

Byproduct. That's what Phex had called me.

She had not thought of the term until this moment. But it was true. Everything that had happened so far was all because of Erelah. She and Jon were trapped in her disastrous wake.

This was all her doing. Her fault.

The answer was simple: End Erelah. Everything can end with her, here and now.

Sela's moves were automatic. The A6 was in her hand before she realized her actions. She gripped the sleek bundle of Erelah's hair, pressing the weapon's muzzle against the hatefully flawless skin of her white throat.

"What if I end this all right now?" Sela asked. "You *begged* me to do it before."

Erelah uttered an edgeless gasp, but did not move or struggle. There was no satisfying fear response from her. It was as if she knew Sela was acting in hollow rage with no real intent.

"You won't. As much as you may hate me. It won't bring Valen back."

She was right, of course. With a dissatisfied grunt, Sela released her. She had slipped into letting her anger control her and felt a wave of regret, grateful Jon had not witnessed this.

Erelah staggered back. The glossy composure faltered. She righted her clothes. Her hands were trembling. "What if I could offer you a chance at revenge against Tristic?"

Sela dropped the A6 back into its holster. "The only reason you're coming to me is because Jon would never go along with whatever it is you're selling."

"It's true." Erelah gave a slight nod. "He refused to hear me out. He wants us to flee to the Reaches and hide."

"There's no dishonor in that," Sela said. "Not when you are outnumbered, outmatched."

"It won't work," Erelah insisted. Desperation trickled to her voice. "Tristic was willing to destroy an entire station for one person. Hundreds dead. She won't stop there."

The girl was right. Something told Sela that Tristic would no longer care about keeping her operation quiet. She had moved beyond that. Somewhere in the deep black of the skies she was searching, ready to bring the full brunt of Ravstar down upon anything that stood in her way.

"And?"

Erelah shifted, a brief flash of surprise on her face. "The stryker I arrived in is special. It houses a modified singularity that can dramatically destabilize the energy field displacement caused by large velo engines."

"Like on a carrier."

"Or vessel the size of Tristic's ship, the *Questic*. Yes."

"Dramatically destabilize? You mean…"

"With great violence and force," Erelah said. "Tristic trusts no one. She keeps all research and materials on the *Questic*. We destroy it, we can destroy her… in more ways than one."

"*Great violence and force*.' I just love the *sound* of that." Sela arched an eyebrow. "But I just can't help but think there's a catch. Where are we in relation to this 'great violence and force'?"

The girl bit her lip. "There is some risk involved, yes. But—"

"And Jon… does he know of this risk?"

"He doesn't even want to *try*."

"You think nothing of asking me to betray my captain," Sela snapped. "Do you think I would just… go along?

"If you knew it were a means to keep him safe, yes. And as a soldier, you understand sacrifice and duty. Perhaps in time Jon would—"

"You don't know a *thing* about me." Sela stalked away, leaving Erelah to the growing shadows of the courtyard.

33

Sela stretched her neck, trying to work the stiffness out of it as she watched the slow progression of priests weave into the main altar room of the temple. She had spent the night curled in the grav bench on the command loft of the Cassandra, her frame too long to stretch out comfortably. Her neck now felt like a fist full of knots. Of course she could have used the empty bunk room. But the pleasant memory it held for her had turned bitter at their edges. She needed none of that softness. And would confess, if confronted, that she felt somehow she did not *deserve* it.

She had never really had a space of her own before. She had always been housed with others in a squadbay. Her sleep cycles were filled with the sounds of them snoring, or talking in the restful dark. Being in the unnerving quiet of planetside, without the background mutter of engines rumbling underfoot, put her on edge. At least the interior of the Cass was familiar terrain. However, her sleep was shallow, restless. And in it, something quite odd had happened.

Sela had dreamed.

Not an unusual occurrence in itself. But her dreams were always a rehashing of memory, a recall of the day's events. This one had been very different.

In it, she sat beside Atilio on the battered grav couch. He was healthy and whole, radiating such peace, as if he were painted with light. He knew her as his mother.

"There are places I was never meant to see," he explained with the perfect logic of dreams. He picked through the screens of the navsys, finally settling on one. But the destination was odd. It was not an ordinary FP, but a dead node. "You can be free. You never failed me, Sela."

So strange.

She turned that memory over and over, savoring it and fearing that it would eventually be drained of its potency.

In the early light of dawn she made her way up that steep hill before the raucous crowds would form. It was Lineao she needed to see. She wanted to avoid another confrontation with Jon or Erelah.

She watched the priests file past, their shaven heads bowed in prayer. They had begun a low muttering chant. The sound was eerie; the deeper tones made the hairs at the back of her neck stand on end. The words were meaningless to her. The last of the priests disappeared inside the incense-laden interior of the altar chamber. Lineao was not among them.

Sela uttered a quiet curse. It was as if man were purposefully avoiding her. Yet he was her only trustworthy contact on Tasemar. She needed him. The man that claimed to be a simple priest was more than he seemed. He would know someone, perhaps even a ship's captain, who could grant her passage off this ball of dust.

A latecomer arrived, but her hope flattened. It was Erelah. The young woman regarded Sela with a measured coolness before gliding through the heavy doors. It was odd watching her like this: composed and almost haughty. Sela still expected an erratic explosion of tears or chaotic nonsense.

She turned to leave, intent on searching the rest of the compound for Lineao, and nearly collided with Jon.

He made as if to touch her, then stopped.

Sela strode past him.

He caught her elbow with his hand. "I've been looking for you everywhere."

She looked down at his hand and then up at him. Whatever her expression, it made him drop his hand.

"Sela," Veradin said. "We're leaving Tasemar."

"It's for the best, sir. The sooner the better," she replied flatly. The ache in her chest appeared when she looked into his eyes, the way skin pinched there when she called him 'sir'. So she looked instead at the packed earth under her boots.

"You're not coming with us, are you?" he asked. The muscles along his jaw tensed.

"It's for the best," she repeated. A tightness invaded her throat.

The only sounds were voices and ragged fragments of music from the hillside below the temple.

"Don't do this. Don't let it be like this."

"I *am* thinking about this. This is the correct thing to do. You'll be safe in the Reaches."

Just walk away. Before you change your mind. It's for the best, he'll realize that eventually.

Sela turned, stepping quickly. Soon she was in the growing dawn in the small temple courtyard. A warm wind kicked into life, promising the arrival of more torturous heat as the day drew on.

But she heard him behind her.

"Stop, Ty. Please."

In the narrow alley between the slouched mud buildings she finally stopped.

"Please, just listen." he said. "Will you at least look at me?"

Arms folded, she turned.

He moved to touch her. She stepped back.

"You can't just—"

"There's a port half a day from here. Sarmen," she said, hoping her voice did not betray the lie. "I'm going there. Some non-reg traders have established off-world routes."

He did not try to hide the hurt in his voice. "And then what?"

"Passage off this rock. I have skills people can use." Sela brushed an impatient palm against her eyes, swiping away the precursor to tears.

"So what? You're going to be a merc now?" A damning tone entered his voice.

"I'll do what I have to."

Then, after a long silence he said, "Then do me one last thing. Please?"

She studied him, canting her head. He held his hands up as if to say, *this is not a trick to keep you here.*

"I need to prep the Cass. I want Erelah to stay here where it's safe, meanwhile."

She arched an eyebrow at him. "And?"

"Just keep an eye on her until I get back. A few hours," he begged. "She has some… messed up notion of going after Tristic."

Sela stiffened, recalling Erelah's overture in the courtyard. "You don't think she'll actually try something?"

He shook his head. "I don't know what to think. But I'm getting her out of here before I find out."

She hated herself even as her shoulders sagged. "Fine. I'll watch her."

Sela ate quickly, like a booter at chow, under the great open canopy where the priests took their meals. Across the way, she watched Erelah push her food around on her plate, eating with no real enthusiasm. She wondered if the girl was still determined to make her risky play to strike back at Tristic. It spoke of a level of bravery that Sela had, until now, assumed was missing.

One of the priests had approached Erelah and seemed to be attempting to engage her in conversation. Sela hoped it would not last. She was eager to leave the crowd before the curious glances of the others turned to questions. Some of the men she recognized from the temple compound. The rest were unknowns and therefore variables that made her uncomfortable. She thought of eyes and ears everywhere, what Erelah had described as Tristic's own private intelligence army. The surviving members of the Veradin Kindred were right to flee, regardless whether Tristic could infiltrate their sanctuary or not.

She felt someone approach on her left. In the corner of her vision, she glimpsed a small body wrapped in frayed brown. The boy, Sarrid.

"What," she said between mouthfuls, not bothering to turn.

"You're different," he said devoid his customary timidity. The earlier comparison she had conjured with a Fleet tech was gone. There was a backbone to the boy.

"And you're rather short," Sela replied, still watching Erelah.

"I'm only ten," Sarrid replied defensively. He reached across her plate. Sela grabbed his wrist. The boy froze. Her action had been a reflex. She realized that in his other hand he bore a large earthenware jug filled with water. Obviously his duty was to serve water. Sela released her grip.

He stepped back.

"Why do you have that?" He pointed at the A6 nestled in its holster against her hip.

Sela turned, shooing his hand away. "Want to see eleven? Don't be so bloody curious about me."

The boy hurried away, sloshing water in his wake.

When Erelah finally left the mess tent, Sela watched her go directly to a smaller sanctuary with only one visible point of access. The area looked cramped and Sela had no desire to interact with the young woman any more than necessary. If she wanted to starve and throw herself into prayer and lamentation, Sela was not about to intervene. Satisfied that she could watch the doorway of the smaller

temple from a vantage in the courtyard, Sela decided to take up a post there. She lingered in the morning sun, suffering the occasional awkward glance of the Order's members. Very few pilgrims were armed like she, it seemed. Sela found that acceptable.

The low rock wall on which she was perched was bleached bone white under the punishing suns. Surprisingly, green vines were being trained to climb its height. The shock of color was vivid against the murky browns of the desert beyond the garden. She realized that this was the spot where she had held vigil for Atilio, and quickly climbed down.

"You'd be wise to find cover from the suns, Tyron." She turned to see Lineao striding up to her. "They can be powerful."

"I'll manage," she replied, wiping beads of sweat from her forehead. She kept her eyes trained on the door of the small temple. A mother carrying a toddler on her hip exited the curtained entrance. Sela tensed.

Lineao looked over his shoulder to the doorway. "Erelah is quite safe in the shrine to Brilta. Only women and children may enter. It may be some time until she leaves." He turned back to her. "Do you know the story of Brilta?"

"Let me guess. Another Fate?" Sela asked. The skin across the back of her neck felt tight with the distinct beginnings of a sunburn taking root. Why would they build a place in the desert with such limited shade?

"No. A simple mortal that lived long ago, a shield maiden, in fact," Lineao said. "That is what they used to call female soldiers. In the days before the Expanse, Brilta served an ancient house called Novia."

"I *know* what a shield maiden is," she said with no real enthusiasm. It was as if Erelah were purposefully trying to torment her: stuck under the blazing suns and forced to listen to more morality tales from Lineao.

"Brilta was loyal and true and a courageous fighter. She loved the lord of the house, well beyond her duty as a soldier. But the Lord Novia knew nothing of her."

Sela shifted on her feet at the reference, realizing why Lineao had chosen this story and her as a captive audience.

"One day, the Fate, Metauri, appeared to Brilta and promised to make Novia love her. In return, Metauri would later come to claim her payment. Brilta agreed. And soon Novia came to love his shield maiden. He made her his lady wife and together they had a son. True to her word, Metauri returned to claim her token for joining the Paths of Novia and Brilta."

"Their son, right?" she asked. What a bunch of evil bitches. Why would anyone bother to worship them?

Lineao nodded. "Brilta and Novia waged war against the Fate. Many of the lord's men were lost. His lands lay scorched and wasted by battle. All seemed lost until Miri intervened."

Sela snapped her attention back to the doorway of the temple, realizing her attention was drifting away from her target.

"And so, Miri stood between the armies of her sister and of Novia. She could not bear to see the suffering. She offered a deal to Novia. 'I shall give you a choice: your kingdom or your son?' Novia did not pause. 'Take my kingdom. I shall live as a pauper, if it means I can keep my true wealth, my son.'"

Sela directed a surprised frown at the priest. "And Brilta retaliated? She sought revenge against Metauri?"

"That's not the point." Lineao shook his head.

"The point to what?"

"The story."

"What a waste of resources." She turned back to watch the shrine.

The priest uttered a low chuckle.

"What."

"The response of a soldier," Lineao replied. She detected the slightest bit of exasperation in his tone.

"Sorry to disappoint." Sela moved away from the wall into the thicker part of the garden of the courtyard, making sure her line of sight was not impaired. *How long could one woman pray?* She heard the footsteps of the priest behind her.

"Have you considered talking to the Three?" he asked. "It occurs to me, you would have a great deal to tell them. And they, in turn, might offer guidance, should you choose to listen."

Sela countered. "Not going to happen."

He gave a strange shrug that suggested he was unconvinced, then stooped to pinch off a dead leaf among the vines.

"It's amazing to see anything green here," she said, desperate to change the subject.

"With the proper attention, one can nurture growth in the most unlikely, inhospitable places."

Somehow, Sela knew he was not just talking about plants. She rolled her eyes. Conversations with him were minefields.

"Jonvenlish tells me that you have chosen to remain on Tasemar," Lineao continued. He granted her a knowing glance under the shade of his hood. "Oddly, I have never heard of Sarmen."

She chewed the inside of her cheek. Sarmen had been a lie to push Jon away. The decision still made her feel bruised and wrong, but she continued to tell herself it was for the right reasons. They were vulnerable together, too willing to make rash decisions and take insane risks. This would keep him safe. In time, he would see it. Beyond seeing Jon and Erelah off into the nebulous unknown, she had no plan. It most certainly did not involve remaining a permanent fixture within the Temple of Miseries, however.

"It's just better this way." She returned, not certain of who she was trying to convince.

"When we first met, you asked me how long I had been on the run as a deserter. I was not entirely honest."

"You'll forgive me if I'm not shocked." She watched an errant gust of wind move the curtained doorway to the shrine.

"It was in the time of the Purge, when First decided to rid the Known Worlds of the Humans. I was a Seeker then, one trained to hunt and eradicate. My mission brought me to Tasemar. There were rumors of the priests sheltering Humans and other fugitive species."

"A Seeker?" She was impressed.

"I was ambushed by smugglers and well outnumbered. Ironically, they feared I was here for their stolen goods and weapons. A merchant found me as I clung to life and brought me to the very temple I had meant to infiltrate. A cleric to the Fates, Mahir, saved me, set my body to healing. None of the Order knew my identity or my true intent. I spent many weeks here. In time Mahir came to entrust me with his secret, for he was quite old, dying."

"His secret?" Sela looked at him.

"Mahir had been sheltering children… Human children, orphaned in the Purge. A mere handful. By this time, my extraction was long overdue. It was easy to think of myself as abandoned."

Lineao paused to look at her. Sela knew she was meant to see the similarities in their stories, both abandoned on this dusty world by the Regime.

"In the faces of these Human young, I could see no difference between them and a Eugenes child. The young ones regarded Mahir with such trust. And, after a time, they came to trust me as well. I was becoming part of this place. But the Fates always have other plans, Tyron, do they not?

"I've noticed."

Lineao examined a lone yellow blossom on a melon vine as he spoke. "My fellow Seekers at last came to extract me. They arrived in the night, dragging Mahir from his bed, into this very garden. On his knees, he pled up at them. Offered his life for those of the Palari children."

"And?"

His eyes were hooded from the harsh sunlight.

"I did what must be done, Tyron. What the Fates had expected of me. Why they had placed me here." His tone was matter of fact. "To the Regime, the men of my team were another small set of casualties. Lucrid Eno perished with those trained murderers. That night he became Jarryd Lineao, a simple novice of this divine Order."

He did not have to tell her the rest. Sela imagined that somewhere deep in the desert surrounding Macula was a shallow unmarked pit in which rested the members of his former Seeker brethren. Or, perhaps more poetically, their bodies had never left this garden.

"And the fugitives?" she asked. "I mean… the children."

He held his hands out, making a scattering gesture. "They were separated, sent to other places. But I remained."

Sela froze, considering. "Is it possible that two of them went to Argos? A boy and an infant girl?"

Lineao shook his head. "It has been many years, Tyron. Dozens of Palari called this sanctuary at one time."

What were the odds that I'd end up seeking refuge in the very temple that once housed my captain and his sister as refugees? Sela disliked the thought. If it were true, then what other things in her life that she thought ruled by chance or achievement, had been destined or constructed by unseen hands?

This was his attempt to persuade her to stay with Veradin, she guessed. But everything with her captain was so damaged, confusing. It felt hopeless to try to make sense of it, especially after this morning.

"I'm leaving." It was an announcement, though she was uncertain who she meant to convince. "The moment Veradin returns. I need you to set me up with a contact. Someone with a ship—"

"Yes. Yes. I know a few pilots. Some of them are even trustworthy," he said. "But tell me, Tyron, where do you expect this ship to take you? Certainly not on your destined Path."

"My path is to leave here."

Lineao tilted his head. "If that is your wish."

"What?" She had expected another argument about duty or destiny to serve, assigned by the Fates.

"If that is your wish," he repeated with a patronizing smile. His tone was that of an adult addressing a small child who had just outlined an impossible fantasy they would like to see come true.

Lineao shuffled off, leaving her deep in doubt.

34

Erelah was careful to keep the hood pulled over her head as she maneuvered through the crowded marketplace. She avoided contact with anyone. If even a casual touch could conjure the Sight, she feared what being in the midst of a crowd would bring.

She paused in the shade of a boarded-up building scarred by fire as she scanned the crowd for any sign of Tyron. A sea of strangers flowed past. No one seemed to notice her. She was simply another pilgrim wandering Macula. Satisfied that Tyron was still probably waiting for her outside the shrine to Brilta, she said a silent thanks for Brother Lineao's help in distracting her bodyguard.

Briefly shutting her eyes, Erelah dug into the memories she had stolen from Tyron last night during their confrontation in the courtyard. Erelah found that these were easier to handle that the actual act of sharing Sight with another. It was more like thumbing through image captures in a frame: *their frantic return to Tasemar, a hectic search for intel about the Temple of the Miseries and, questioning patrons in the taverns that lined the high street about Lineao.*

She opened her eyes and studied the faces of the buildings nearby. *There.*

A building across the busy street, further down the hill. That was the place. It was a gambling house with metal latticed windows and a faded sand dragon standard over the door. That was where Tyron had sensed danger from the men inside. *Mercs. Bounty hunters.* If they were enough to make Tyron feel wary, then they would do for Erelah's plan to work.

Erelah drew in a deep breath, steeling herself. And then froze to the spot. She needed something to spur matters on. It was a chancy move, but in the early hours of dawn it seemed like the perfect plan.

How do I even know this will work? I'm no soldier. I'm not even a scientist anymore. What do I think I'm doing?

"Didn't 'spect you to be so pretty."

The rough voice made her startle. She turned to look at its owner.

He was a young man, a rarity in Macula after the recent Regime occupation. He grinned startlingly white teeth against sun-darkened skin. One of his hands rested on the hilt of a sinister-looking curved blade strapped under the drape of his robe.

And I purposefully dodged a well-trained soldier's protection to come here.

Alone.

Her heart flattened under the thought.

What was I thinking?

"Where's that Regime whore?" he asked.

That was a good question, although Tyron would disagree violently with his choice of titles.

When it was clear Erelah would not answer, he yanked her to him savagely.

"That skew cut your tongue out when he bought you?" he asked, looking her up and down.

Bought me?

Wide-eyed, Erelah shook her head. She realized. *He doesn't know who I am.* He had assumed she was some sort of slave or concubine. Although she'd be insulted under any other circumstances, she decided not to correct him. She realized that while Tristic might prefer to use her own private intelligence army and work in subterfuge, the Regime had done steady trade in the Known Worlds, with bounties for deserters like her brother and Tyron.

"I'm so glad that you found me," she said haltingly in Commonspeak, swallowing her consonants. "Fates bless you for freeing me, sir."

Erelah cringed. She knew what she sounded like when she attempted the language: a high born, mocking a commoner's accent. Thankfully, he was too impressed with himself to notice.

"Free you." He jerked his chin in a nod. His self-congratulatory smile re-emerged. "Of course, sweetling."

She did not need the Sight to tell the man was lying. The lupine glint in his eyes told her he might harbor other plans for her. Her past experience with Maynard had paid off in that aspect.

"My friends are with that crester skew Veradin right now." He turned them in the direction of the landing field. "Nice payday. Never seen a bounty like that.

Even more if we get that Regime whore… though I won't weep if she ends up dead in the process."

Erelah pointed over her shoulder toward the Temple of the Miseries. It now seemed so far away. This was not going at all as she had hoped. "Take me back to the temple. I'll bring you to the Regime woman."

He glanced around as he seemed to reconsider.

"She's injured. Easy for a strong man like you to overpower," she prodded.

He reached up, pushing the hood from her head. His fingers brushed along her face. Erelah felt the tremble build along her every nerve at once, straining against that tender barrier in her mind. The brief touch had been enough to get a taste of him. She felt something *uncoil* at the base of her skull. The Sight was awake and greedy with hunger.

She pushed out at him, just the briefest of effort.

Take me back to the Temple.

Something flickered behind his eyes.

"Come on then, girl."

Turning, he pulled her in the direction of the temple, his fingers digging painfully into her upper arm.

As the suns shifted in the sky to cast shadows, Sela moved to the relative shade of a small outbuilding directly across from the shrine.

The Fates would get bored of hearing from Erelah eventually.

Jon, the things I do for you.

With a defeated sigh, she slid down the wall and pulled her knees up against her chest. Her head felt baked and the skin on her forearms was starting to turn pink. Even her patience was beginning to evaporate. Regardless of her reluctance to be in such intimate surroundings with Erelah, she was considering going inside just to be out of the sun. Maybe if she were glare in silence at the back of the girl's head, she would get the message that it was time to wrap it up. Perhaps the Fates would even be grateful to Sela for cutting off the prayer marathon.

Subdued giggling grabbed her attention.

Peeking out from a gap in the curtains were two Tasemarin children. Eyes wide under shaggy heads of hair, they regarded Sela in naked fascination. By the time she was their size she could field strip a weapon and understand basic defense strategy. These two children knew nothing of that.

A woman, graying and hunched, suddenly appeared behind the children. She warbled admonishing commands in Tasemarin and herded the younglings back into the shrine. Her sharp-eyed gaze studied Sela before she followed them in.

Sela realized the woman knew her for what she was. The rest of Macula was filled with the elderly and children. There were more widows and orphans than young men and women of combat age. It was the earmark of a place that had waged insurrection and paid for it in the death and conscription of their youth.

We have been foolish.

Despite the bustle and new-found activity of Macula, they were painfully conspicuous. The pilgrims coming and going from the temple might offer cover and distraction, but they did not mean safety. Sela might have shed her uniform, but she was not like them. She stood a full head taller. Despite their time on the run with meager supplies, she was well-fed in appearance. Her spine was straight and long and had never been crooked with hard labor. Her dark blonde hair was clipped short to regulation standard, regardless of how shaggy it might feel to her.

She was a Regime criminal who had lain siege to their town and desecrated their beloved temple. They did not know her name or her face, but they knew what Sela represented. For that, they would have gladly stoned her to death in the very street.

I have to get Erelah. Now.

She sprang to her feet and covered the distance to the shrine's doorway with hurried strides.

"Erelah." Sela pulled back the heavy curtain. Brilliant sunlight pierced the dim interior. It was a tiny curved room lined with dozens of clay lanterns that illuminated frescos on the walls. The gray haired Tasemarin woman frowned up from the floor where she knelt flanked by the two children.

But no Erelah.

"You're looking for the pale lady with the pretty hair?"

Sela turned. It was the female child that had spoken.

"Aziza, be quiet." The old woman snapped, wrapping a protective arm around the girl.

"You saw her?" Sela asked. "Where did she go?"

"Through there." The girl held up a chubby finger and pointed at a tapestry hanging from the wall.

Sela frowned. "There?"

The girl nodded enthusiastically before being commanded to turn back to the altar.

Sela went to the tapestry and pulled it aside. A small wooden door, waist high, was set into the wall. She swung it open to find that it exited on the opposite side of the courtyard.

"Damn it all." She spat and set off in a sprint for the main part of the temple.

35

The merc dragged Erelah into one of the lesser-used pathways between outbuildings and thrust her against the wall.

"What about the soldier? Don't you want me to take you to her?" she asked.

"She can wait," he said with a predatory grin. His free hand once more touched her bare skin as he held the blade against her neck.

She exhaled a long, quivering breath. The sensation of heat erupted down her back, pushing out toward her captor. She envisioned tendrils, great hooked and ravenous roots digging into his brain. He trembled, frozen in place like a man subjected to high voltage.

His mind splayed open to her in a series of disjointed flashes: *the dank innards of a tavern, a covenant of three mercenaries huddled around a table in conspiracy, the one in red seemed the leader, bloodthirsty, enough to evoke fear in his counterparts. The fugitive codex beacons displayed the image files: Wanted for desertion and treason, Jonvenlish Veradin, former captain. Known associate, Sela Tyron, former commander of the Regime. Bounties set at incredible sums. Enough to share.*

Erelah pulled away like a diver surfacing for air. It had only been mere seconds, but felt like an eternity.

The knife was still clutched in his hand, but wavered. His whole body seemed to twitch in time with an unheard tune. His eyes locked, unblinking. She knew what needed to be done.

"I'm sorry. It wasn't supposed to happen like this," she said.

Mid-stride Sela felt a sudden jolt. She changed direction abruptly, kicking up a spray of gravel and headed for a smaller alley between buildings on the temple's

spinward side. She told herself it was something she had heard or even noticed subconsciously, because the alternative made her uneasy.

It would have meant Erelah's "gift" had something to do with it.

Taking the corner, she sprinted down the narrow alley, pausing long enough to unholster the A6. At first she thought it was a bundle of rags in the passage. As she stepped closer, Sela realized it was the body of a man, his back propped against the wall and his legs splayed.

Hot pinpricks marched down her scalp.

The man was not dead, as she had first assumed but well on his way. His chest heaved. A ragged wet gurgling bubbled out of the hole in his neck. A blade protruded from his throat, his hand clutched around the hilt weakly. She recognized him.

It was one of the young men she questioned in her search for Lineao when they arrived on Tasemar.

Sela crouched over him. Beneath the wet rattle of his dying was the distinctive sound of static broken by a tiny voice. Her hands searched the folds of his clothes, then encountered the collar mount of the throat mic slimy with blood. It was an outmoded Regime issue vox.

Mercs.

Sela stood. Erelah was in danger. She had to find her.

Behind her came the scrape of a shoe over stone. Sela swung out an arm and grabbed a fist of clothes from her attacker. She pulled the person easily from the shadowed eave. Someone small and light. Sela realized, with a mix of annoyance and relief, that it was Erelah.

How could she go from being a raving lunatic to a stealth commando in such a short time?

The younger woman's expression was etched with distress. Erelah's words tangled in a hectic rush: "It worked. I didn't think it would work."

"What happened? What did you do?" Sela released her grip.

Wide-eyed but somehow still in control, Erelah looked up from the dead man.

"I brought him here."

"You did *what*? You're insane." Sela jabbed a finger at her sternum. "They didn't fix you. Tristic is still controlling you."

"*No!* It's not like that. It's part of my plan." Erelah stepped back.

"Your plan to get us all killed?"

"You were the one that refused to hear me out."

"So you brought a *merc* here?" Sela gestured down at the lifeless form. "*You* killed him?"

"No. I mean… I made him do it to himself," Erelah said shakily.

Sela took a wary step back, eyes narrowed. Her finger moved off the trigger guard on the A6.

Erelah held her hands up. Both were covered in drying maroon. "Don't look at me like that. It just… happened. It wasn't supposed to happen like this."

The vox dangled like a dead animal from Sela's fist. A tiny voice called from it, words indiscernible.

"He wasn't alone. It's not safe here," Sela said.

"I know," Erelah replied. "There are three others with him. They have Jon at the landing field. They've summoned Ravstar to collect your bounties."

"What!" She erupted. "That should have been the first bloody thing you said!"

Erelah remained rooted in place, staring down at the body. "I didn't think it would work."

"We are leaving. Now!" Sela shouted. "Move."

She herded Erelah through the winding narrow passages between the outbuildings, urging her into a sprint when she slowed. As they approached the edge of the courtyard, Sela pulled her back. "Hold."

Something did not seem right. The street below the hill was now practically deserted. Only a few merchants with carts trundled past the walls.

"Where is everyone?" Erelah asked. She was not entirely oblivious, Sela noted. There was hope for her yet.

"Hiding." She studied the street.

"How do you know?"

She looked at Erelah, incredulous. "I just *know*."

They couldn't take the street downhill to the landing site of the Cass. In the baleful glow of daylight, their path would take them under too many higher vantages, exposing them to a lookout or a marksman. They needed to find another way off the temple mount and they could not afford to wait for the cover of dark.

Erelah could have her "gift"; Sela had years of experience. These people knew what it was to live with war. She had seen it on a dozen worlds through as many campaigns. The local inhabitants were not lifeless buildings or rocks. They were a living, breathing component of the terrain and just as unpredictable as the enemy. Even though they might not all take up armaments, it was clear where their loyalties lay. They spoke to each other without words: a surreptitious nod here, a hooded glance there. Their actions and reactions were priceless intel.

Sela backed further into the shadows of the pagoda, hopeful they had not been spotted. Erelah followed.

"Just get me to the stryker," Erelah said. "I can fix this. I can still salvage my plan."

"Shut up about your stupid plan. First thing's first. Where's Lineao?" Sela asked. If there was another way off the top of the hill without being seen, he would know. "We need him."

"At prayer with the others."

At the temple's vestibule, Erelah wrenched free of Tyron's grip. The soldier glared at her commandingly, then strode into the middle of the prayer chamber, unannounced. Over a dozen priests were posed in supplication, foreheads bent to the floor with their hoods drawn over their heads. With her imposing weapon still gripped in one hand, Tyron began pulling back their hoods, shouting "Lineao!"

"Commander!" Lineao answered in a hushed voice. He rose from his spot farthest from the altar near the station of the Unworthy.

Erelah pulled a tight, uncomfortable smile at the incredulous stares of the remaining members of the Order. Only a handful knew who they were. The rest saw their novice being led away by a crazed-looking Eugenes pilgrim wielding a weapon.

"Lovely service," Erelah stammered, backing out the door.

"Come on!" Tyron growled. She herded the both into the *pronaos*, where the priests would don their cloaks.

Sela grabbed a cloak from a peg and threw it at Erelah. "Put this on," Tyron commanded. "Cover your head."

She turned to Lineao. "A bounty hunter has infiltrated the compound," she told him. "The street is most likely under surveillance. We need to get back to our ship without being seen. Can you make that happen?"

Lineao cast a glance at the entrance before he replied. "Follow me."

He led them through a passage off the *pronaos*. Soon they reached a low-set door and went through it, into the monastery's food larder. He moved to a long, heavy table set against the far wall and gestured for Tyron to go to its opposite side. Together, they maneuvered it away from the wall. Behind it, a darkened entrance, waist high, was carved out of the mud walls. A damp draft came from the opening, smelling of age and mildew.

"Here. The passage runs below the hillside. It empties out near the small river below the landing field."

Sela glowered at the priest. "My team could have used this. We could have gotten to the extraction site in half the time."

"And you would have been greeted with a dozen armed men and your death," Lineao replied.

"You were just stalling for her, weren't you? Today in the courtyard, you were trying to distract me from watching her. Wasting my time," Tyron demanded.

"Please, Commander," Erelah said, trying to step between them. "I asked Brother Lineao to keep you occupied."

"I did not consider it wasted time in trying to counsel a soul in turmoil," Lineao said, easing Erelah to his side.

"Turmoil?" Tyron grabbed a fist full of Lineao's robe. "A world of hurt is going to rain down on this place if Ravstar comes here. Then you'll see *turmoil*."

Erelah placed a hand on Tyron's arm. "Not if we move quickly. Once we are off-world, we can lure Tristic away from Tasemar."

36

"Come on. Move it!" Sela prodded Erelah's back.

The tunnel was narrow with little clearance, forcing them to move in a stooped scamper. Occasionally the chem light in their hands picked out sagging beams and sections that seemed near collapse. These obstacles slowed their pace further.

"Stop shoving me," Erelah groused.

"Oh, you'll *know* when I'm shoving you."

Erelah uttered a curse in Commonspeak. To hear the gutter words stretched over the pretentious arch of her crester accent made Sela chuckle.

"Why are you laughing?"

"You need to practice cursing. No one will ever take you seriously." Sela prodded her again.

"Quit!"

"Then move faster."

Erelah's forward motion slowed, then stopped altogether. "You go first."

Sela stopped. "Are you afraid of the dark?"

"No. Yes."

"Which one is it?"

The girl turned, her features etched in the green glow of the chem light in her hand. "I don't expect you to understand. I'm not like you. I never got training like yours. Never got whatever mental conditioning you did to strengthen you if you're held captive."

"Is that what you think?" she scoffed.

It never ceased to amaze Sela, the colorful stories that circulated about breeders. Sometimes she wished half of it were true. If so, she would be immortal and nearly three meters tall.

"Well, it's true, isn't it?" Erelah asked.

"Veradin, when a breeder is held captive, we're told not to expect a rescue. You're on your own. They don't ransom us like they do a crester. You're just another casualty. Help isn't coming."

Erelah pressed against the wall and Sela squeezed past, careful not to touch her.

"I guess that explains a lot."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Sela whirled on her.

"Only why you are like that. Hard. All hard edges. All the soft spots buried really deep," Erelah blurted. "I would have given anything for such strength."

Sela continued forward, feeling her way. The chem light did little to dispel the darkness. The downward slope underfoot began to even out.

She surprised herself when she said, "I told you once, if you're anything like Jon, you have strength… somewhere. It's the reason you made it this far."

It was a bricky move she made with the merc, after all. Even though she was hard-pressed to understand how Erelah had thought *that* was going to work out for her.

"Tristic threatened to kill Jon if I did not comply."

"I spent a great deal of my career keeping Jon alive too."

They moved on in silence for a few more yards. Then, Erelah said, "You must give him a second chance, Tyron. Together you are so much stronger."

"No." Sela halted. The girl collided with her back. "You and I are not having this conversation. I'm getting you to the Cass and that's the end."

Erelah placed her hand on Sela's shoulder. "But you still care about him. I saw—"

"Don't touch me," she growled, shrugging her hand off.

"It doesn't work like that."

"Don't care," Sela sing-songed, mimicking Erelah's arched accent. She renewed her speed. How long was this tunnel anyway?

"When I touch someone for the first time, their bare skin, I can see things about them," Erelah said. "There's no order to it. It's as if I *become* them for a moment. But if I touch them again, it's much less powerful. Over time it all starts to fade, like static discharge."

Erelah's tone turned introspective. "I don't think Tristic had planned this. I think it's like a side effect. Brother Liri said that it was dormant in me. Something changed when—"

"Oh. *Do* stop talking," she groaned, exasperated. The thought of such an ability made her insides squirm. "I really don't want to know this."

The tunnel ended abruptly. Sela's hands met rough stone and soil. She thrust the light forward, tracing the wall. There was a sharp turn to the right. Cautiously Sela stepped around. The quality of the air changed. It smelled fresher, dryer. This had to be it.

The sound of running water echoed. A dim light gradually grew from the dark. The roof of the passage grew taller. She was able to stand, though her hair brushed the ceiling. The muscles in her lower back relaxed with gratitude.

With the tunnel opening only a few strides away, Sela turned, holding a silencing hand up to Erelah. The girl nodded back, eyes wide beneath the cowl of the robe.

Just beyond the tunnel's mouth flowed the small river that Lineao had described. It was barely more than an energetic stream of murky brown water. Sliding along the wall, she ventured a glance outside. She saw that a steep embankment towered directly above them. Across the water, the other bank rose in a gentler slope. It could disguise an approach to the landing field up top. Sela saw no signs of another living soul.

This was too easy.

She withdrew into the tunnel and regarded Erelah. Then, sighing unhappily, she held out the A6 to her. The girl regarded the weapon as if Sela were holding a poisonous sand dragon for her to pet. When she did not move to take it, she took hold of Erelah's wrist and shoved the weapon into her grip. Quickly she snatched her hand away at the curious sensation of heat traveling up her arm.

"I am going to want that back," Sela said.

She stood, thinking. That quiet voice that had served her all her life told her that a trap probably awaited them at the ship.

"They'll keep Jon alive. And they don't know that Ravstar is really looking for me. That's an advantage for us," said Erelah.

Sela nodded. The bounty for him alive was triple that for a dead Jonvenlish Veradin. The Regime was rather more specific when it came to breeders who deserted: dead. Of their unlikely trio of fugitives, only Erelah was not technically hunted. She was, after all, *nowhere*, according to the information they had gleaned from the coms array. Tristic could not dare issue a warrant directly for her without raising considerable suspicions.

Ironically the most sought after by Tristic, was the safest.

"You know how to use it?" Sela jerked her chin at the A6 that Erelah now held like a contaminant.

She lofted the weapon, keeping its muzzle trained at the ground. Her strange green eyes fixed on the middle distance between them. Sela felt the pins and needles stir along the back of her neck.

Erelah's words came out like a rote recitation any driller would be pleased to hear from a booter:

"Simple single action firing mechanism. Forty metz round with less than .048 recharge. Range 347 meters with adjustable drift. Recoil-free action. It's now at three-quarter charge."

"I think you got it." A shuddering chill danced across Sela's shoulders.

All of that she rifled from my brain.

Erelah released a pent-up breath. "It's really dark in there."

Sela glared. "You done?"

She nodded.

"And when this is all over, we're going to have a chat about privacy."

With that, Sela returned to scan the river and the bank beyond. She shed the empty thigh holster and loose fitting duster. They would slow her down. She noticed Erelah remove her heavy hooded robe. Yet where Sela simply let the garment drop to the ground, the girl reverently folded hers on a pile of rocks.

Sela rolled her eyes as she drew the tactical knife. She switched the blade from hand to hand, getting a feel for it as she visualized her approach across the shallow river, up the embankment. The landing field would offer no cover. She would lose all vantage there. It would be essential to move quickly. Her hope was that the mercs knew nothing of the tunnel and thus were not covering it. She was counting on them to be slow, with poor training.

Her hope and her luck had not been on speaking terms lately, however.

"Three others. You're certain?" Sela asked.

"That's what I saw," Erelah replied, biting her lip.

Sela gave instructions as she resized the A6's holster to fit around Erelah's narrow hips:

"Watch me. Once I get across, wait for me to get to the top of the bank. Look for my signal once it's clear. Then you start across."

"I understand."

Finally Sela slipped the chain bearing Valen and Atilio's idents from her neck. She had strung the Seeker's tracer there too. The A6 was useless without it.

"If I don't return in thirty minutes, take the tunnel back to the temple and find Lineao. Make sure no one else sees you." She coiled the chain into the girl's palm.

"You'll come back," Erelah said, matter-of-factly. "This is why they made you."

Sela met her green-eyed gaze.

"Watch out for the red one," Erelah said.

With a troubled frown, Sela sprinted out of the tunnel to cross the river.

37

The lookout had his back to her. Then Sela realized he was busy taking a leak. Silently, she crept up the embankment and stood behind him. He turned, preoccupied with clasp on his trousers. His eyes widened with surprise. Before he could utter a sound, she punched him in the throat. He practically walked into the knife as it caught him low and to the right. She sank with him to the sun-cooked weeds and knelt over him.

Quickly she scanned her surroundings. The area was as damaged by ordinance as she recalled. Occasional clumps of higher brush dotted the field. The off-worlders visiting Tasemar would very likely remain sparse now that there was no longer Regime support.

Sixty meters away, the Cass lounged on its haunches, the only ship to grace this section of the field. It was a bit too much of a coincidence for her taste.

Satisfied that she had not been seen, Sela did a quick search of the unsuccessful sentry. He looked like a Trelgin half-breed, but he bore the facial tattoos of a Zenti clan. Other than the unreliable-looking scatter gun he had cradled, she found two smaller blades that were nothing in comparison to the tactical knife she already owned. She easily snapped their blades off against a rock and tossed the pieces over her shoulder.

He was just what he seemed: a low-rent merc. For a moment she considered creeping back to the top of the bank to signal for Erelah to come up, but decided against it. Until she knew the location of his compatriots, Jon's sister was safer in the tunnel.

Sprawling on her stomach, she watched the field. Motion caught her eye. On the far side of the Cass, another figure paced back and forth. This one was smaller, more compact. A female merc, she decided.

Proximity would be vital to use the scatter gun. Sela cracked the weapon's rusted breach open. The shells had corroded contacts. Firing the weapon would result in a misfire that could easily take out a finger or three.

Sela sighed resignedly and tossed the useless weapon into the thick brush.

Why were things never easy?

It did not change the situation; she still had surprise as an asset. If she kept the ship between herself and the female merc, she could approach unseen. But there was a big *if* that hinged on the other merc maintaining her predictable pattern of pacing.

Watching, waiting, Sela saw her window and set out at a sprint.

Mere strides away, the female merc turned, placing a hand to her ear. Sela knew the familiar motion for what it was: she was listening to a transmission in her earpiece. The merc looked directly at her. Eyes wide, she brought her sidearm up. Her shot was off target, but not by much. Sela felt the round whistle past her left ear, and renewed her forward charge before the woman could adjust her aim.

She sidestepped the sweep of Sela's knife. But Sela was able to capture the merc's wrist and keep the sidearm trained to the ground. The woman was petite compared to her, but that was where any perceived vulnerability ended. Well-trained muscles strained beneath Sela's grip.

So much for low-rent mercs with no training; this one was a ringer.

They grappled. The gun thudded onto the dirt. Sela brought the knife up, driving for her neck. The merc's free arm came up to block.

Twisting, Sela brought her greater weight to the right. But the grip she held on Sela's wrist twisted and the knife tumbled. Sela countered with a punch to the merc's throat. The women backed away from each other, winded.

Sela feinted, left and then right. The merc matched her, a wild sneer growing on her face. Silver metal decorated her artificially sharpened canines.

"Come on, breeder," she purred with another wicked flash of silver fangs. "Love the ancient combat training."

"Ancient? Just how old do you think I am?"

Fangs attacked. Her right arm came out wide, a strike meant for Sela's face. She blocked and drove her palm up, connecting. This made on opening for Sela to pull her off balance and drive a knee into her unguarded stomach. She crumpled and slid down Sela's leg.

Maneuvering behind her, Sela wedged her arm around the merc's neck. Now powerless she drew red gouges into Sela's forearm with her fingernails. It was like wrestling an angry scythe cat.

"Shh. Shh," Sela growled. "Just one twist and no more you."

Fang's attempted to throw an elbow. Sela allowed the swing and captured the woman's wrist to pin it high against her upper back. There was a corresponding meaty pop from somewhere deep in Fang's shoulder followed by a painful bellow.

"Where's Jon?"

"Screw you, old crone." The merc raged.

Sela pulled the wrist higher. "Sorry. My hearing's going in my old age."

"On your piece of crap ship."

"How many with him?"

Her struggles renewed. Sela had to admire her tenacity.

"Answer!"

Erelah had said three. If one was on the ship that would account for all of them. But Sela was not about to put that much stock in Erelah's strange ability.

"Just me, Commander." A new voice. Male.

Sela looked up.

At the top of the Cassandra's gangway stood a Zenti male. Instead of the usual black facial tattoos, heavy red ink decorated his shaven head in a chunky geometric pattern. It marked him as a *jin-ji*, a clan leader. But for this one to take up the company of non-Zenti mercs meant he had been ousted from his clan.

Watch out for the red one.

Despite the damning heat, a cold tickle ran down between her shoulder blades.

To the Red Zenti's left stood Veradin, his hands bound before him and the muzzle of a compression rifle against his neck. Dried blood was crusted along Jon's upper lip. And to her captain's credit, it seemed Red was sporting several bruises of his own.

Sela's gaze met Jon's briefly. The question was plain in his expression: *Erelah?*

She canted her head subtly in the direction of the ravine. *There. Safe.*

His shoulders sagged imperceptibly with relief.

"Well now," Red observed with artificial glee. "Here is an interesting scenario."

Fangs writhed within Sela's grip. She turned the merc's body in front of her; a shield for now. Sela had to hope that their partnership meant something. But one did not become *jin-ji,* even an ousted one, by playing nice with others.

"Let him go," Sela commanded, squeezing her arm tighter around the female's throat for emphasis.

"Come on, Rutil," Fangs called. "The bitch broke my nose!"

"Quiet, pet."

"Yes. Shut up." Sela yanked on her captured arm for emphasis.

"Where's Hellard?" Rutil peered out over the field.

"Which one was that?"

At this Rutil stiffened. His eyes narrowed.

"You have me," Jon said. "Just let Tyron go. I'm worth three times as much, split two ways now."

The rifle's report registered a half a second after she felt the hot spray of bone and blood along her face and neck. Fangs sagged against Sela's body, lifeless. A new red hole had appeared in the center of her former hostage's head.

"No split now," Rutil observed.

Sela glanced longingly at Fang's discarded sidearm, a tantalizing distance away in the dirt.

"Eh!" Rutil called, admonishing. He clucked his tongue. "You ain't that fast."

Sela scowled at him. He was probably right.

"Now, you come on in out of the hot," Rutil ordered. "We take a seat and wait to collect."

Fantastic. The fool *had* already activated a beacon, as Erelah said. Except to his ultimate surprise it would not be a simple Regime fugitive reclamation squadron. He would be greeted with the gleaming metal brutality of Ravstar. His reward was less likely currency than a gory death.

Sela folded her arms. "No."

Rutil looked to Jon as if for moral support. "No?"

"I'm not going anywhere." Her brain tumbled through possible scenarios, each less likely to have a good outcome.

"I'm not toying with you." Rutil swiveled the rifle between Jon and Sela, deciding on a target.

"Good. Neither am I." In fact, she was surprised he had not shot her yet.

All she could do was buy time. For what, she didn't know. *Something* told her to hold her ground. *Something* was about to happen. She just needed to *wait*. A sudden chill crawled over her shoulders. It was the same sensation as when Erelah had touched her in the cave.

"Ty, quit screwing around." Jon feigned irritation, but his expression was uncertain. *What are you doing?*

"Don't tell me what to do," she shot back.

It took little effort to sound annoyed. It was hot as Sceelah and her patience had evaporated under the boiling twin suns.

"Not that you ever listened anyway," Jon groused.

"As if you've ever had anything intelligent to say!"

"Both of you, shut it!" Rutil yelled. His rifle wavered.

Now! Sela dove forward. Her motion attracted Rutil's attention. He drew aim on her. Jon rammed a shoulder into him. A round zinged off the ground near her right foot just as she snatched Fang's weapon from the dirt.

Rutil collided with the gangway's railing, but he kept a grip on the rifle. Jon grabbed its muzzle. Another wild shot hissed past Sela. As she reached the foot of the ramp, she drew aim on Rutil. He swung the butt around to connect with Jon's jaw. Her captain staggered back, dazed. And the Zenti's rifle was once again trained on her.

Rutil and Sela stood face to face, mere footsteps away from each other on the gangway, both with sights to kill on the other.

He drew in breath to speak. "Listen here—"

There was a single pop. The Zenti fell back into the hatchway of the Cass. A red puddle spread beneath him on the deck. Astonished, Sela looked down at the hole the size of a child's fist in the center of his sternum. He writhed in an attempt to breathe, then lay still.

Jon and Sela regarded each other over the body and turned to the end of the gang way.

Erelah lowered the A6.

"There's no time for this," she said, exhaling a shaky breath. She climbed the ramp and stepped over Rutil's body.

"Tristic is coming."

38

Sela slumped gracelessly into the grav bench beside Jon. She was a bundle of throbbing ribs and aching muscles. With heavy arms, she pulled the nav interface down.

"This doesn't change anything," she said.

"I understand," he said, eyes forward on the viewer.

She regarded his profile in the strange electric silence that stretched between them. And suddenly she felt so weary of fighting that noisome ache in her chest. It sapped her energy, a wasteful burden.

Remaining at the temple with Lineao would have only brought more mercs even if, miraculously, Tristic decided not to lay waste to the entire planetary system as she sought out Erelah.

"We get clear at the next flex point. And then anywhere… anywhere you want to go," Jon offered, still focused on the interface. That particular angry-muscle stood out on his jaw. It was plain he was avoiding looking at her. She found she could not blame him. He had told her he loved her. No one had ever said that to her. And she rewarded that by declaring her intent to leave.

Guiltily, Sela sank further into the bench and rested her head against the torn cushion. The curling of light in the conduit was the only illumination from the forward viewer as the Cass plowed on in its familiar uncertain rhythm.

"The *Storm King*," she said quietly, watching the undulating light pattern of the conduit. "That's where I'd go."

Jon's forehead wrinkled. He turned. "You can't be serious."

"Everything made sense there."

Realistically, Sela knew that returning was impossible. It was foolish to even fantasize about it. But it held the comfort of the familiar and predictable. The

Storm King's world made sense. Her niche there had been plain. Her duties were clear.

Yet she also knew that she could not for a moment squeeze back into that place. It would be two sizes too small and its view of the Known Worlds too narrow. It was an impossibility, even if her honor were miraculously restored and she were no longer considered renegade.

"I know," Jon whispered.

Cautiously, as if fearful he might frighten her away, he shifted in his seat. His hand rested atop hers on the arm of the bench. She did not shrink away.

It still hurt, the untidy mass of emotions wedged beneath her ribs. She had wounded him, yet he still cared, and for some inexplicable reason, still tried. No doubt there were more hurts on the horizon for them. More things to overshadow the last and make these seem common and petty by comparison.

Later. I'll think about it later.

Her eyelids grew heavy as she watched the nearly hypnotic light show within the surrounding conduit on the viewer. She understood the phenomenon in vague terms. The splendorous curtain was simply the light of stars pinioned to normal space when viewed through the veil of the vessel's present course in the conduit.

There had been few spaces to watch it on a carrier like the *Storm King*, and not many of her comrades would have wasted the time to witness it. It was stuff for techs or, at best, a fleeting distraction. Well before her promotion to commander, when Jonvenlish Veradin was still a life-upending storm on the horizon, Valen had smuggled scorch rum back onship. They had stolen into a forward section of the *Storm King* and lounged against crates, laughing at their own brazen action as they watched the dancing lights of the conduits from the slender portal.

Sela drifted into the less-solid realm between memory and dreams, head tucked into her chest. Exhaustion claimed her.

It was the vicious buck of the deck that jarred her awake. A metal purring was joined by a new protesting whine from the Cass's engines.

Hard stop.

She righted herself on the bench, realizing that she had been resting against Jon's shoulder.

As she watched the viewers the tapestry of conduit lights evaporated, to be replaced by the stagnant star field of normal space.

Jon cursed under his breath. "Lost the mains. Very lucky we were near a flex point."

Very lucky, indeed. The violent forces of popping lose from a conduit without a flex point could snap a vessel into tiny pieces.

Sela blinked away sleep and pulled down the interface from its perch on the mounted arm. The navsys screen was still up where she had left. What she saw there was less than ideal.

"Dead FP," she muttered, taking in their coordinates. Although there was a naturally-occurring flex point, there was nothing of value nearby: no ports, no trading stations. Not even a meteor belt with modestly useful ores for processing. It was a good place to hide. But not the best place to be a distressed ship. Sela doubted that any official Regime nav charts would have even bothered to include this dead FP. Considering the chart's source, it would be exactly the sort of place to be used by Phex's customary level of clientele.

"Maybe we were too close to the horizon when we passed a flex point?" Sela ventured.

Jon shook his head. "Unless the guidance is off calibration, I don't see how. And it doesn't explain the shut down."

The Cass was essentially adrift. A quick glance told her that they were working off battery reserves, which was why they still had atmo and a-grav.

"Pull up a diagnostic," Jon ordered. He unbuckled his harness and climbed over the back of the grav bench. "I'll check on Erelah on my way to the engineering loft."

Sela nodded distractedly, her attention riveted to the charts. A quiet, unsettled sensation grew. For a second, she thought of the strange dream with Atilio seated beside her, thumbing through nav charts.

Something about the display danced on the edge of memory. Frustrating, unfocused. If there was one thing Sela could always rely on, it was a faultless memory. She thumbed out of the navsys with the intent of looking for what passed for a diagnostic program on this bucket. A series of unfamiliar commands caught her eye, followed by the red-bordered screen with captions in Commonspeak.

Command lock out.

The unsettled sensation blossomed into an electric jolt.

"Jon!" she shouted, slapping the vox line open.

She scrambled over the bench, headed to the engineering loft.

"It's not the engines," she called.

Ignoring the ladder, she jumped down to the common passage and nearly collided with his back. He continued to face the corridor, unmoving, hands out at his sides.

"The ship was programmed to dump us out here," Sela continued, confusion mounting. "We're locked out."

Dressed in the same baggy flight suit in which they had found her, Erelah stood at the opposite end of the corridor with the plasma rifle trained on them.

"You've done this."

"I did," said Erelah. "You left me no choice."

The look of betrayal on Tyron's face was as Erelah had expected, but on Jon, it was nearly enough to crush her heart. In that moment she nearly lost her nerve.

This is how it must be. Better to have him live in hurt and anguish than have him die, either of them.

There was no time for second-guessing.

They were well clear of Tasemar. Their course would have drawn Tristic here. Right where she had intended.

When Erelah had found the dead FP node on the Cassandra's nav charts; it was perfect. She needed a large sector of uninhabited space. The fewer innocents to impact, the better. It was as if Miri herself had answered her prayers.

Of course, Tyron's rage would be astronomical when she realized Erelah had essentially sight-jacked her while she slept to input the new coordinates. She had little choice. The soldier was nearly impossible for Erelah to influence while conscious. At least she had tried to disguise it as a pleasant dream for Tyron. There were few pleasant things in the soldier's memory. *It* was *pretty dark in there.*

The seconds were ticking away. And there was still so much to do. By now Tristic would have detected the new course. Erelah had been as careful as she could be. In tiny sips, she had allowed the images to seep through that soft scar within her mind. It was easy to picture some gruesome black animal at the other side of that delicate membrane, hungrily lapping at the fissures and trying to claw its way back in. She counted on Tristic being so bent on her designs, so set on Erelah's recapture, that reasoning would not lead her to question this new destination.

The *Questic* was on the way. This had to work.

As if Miri heard her silent prayers, the proximity alert beacon began to chime self-importantly from the command loft. Another vessel was exiting the flex point.

"What are you doing?" Tyron challenged. She took a menacing stride forward, placing her body in front of Jon. The brave shield maiden still.

Jon seized her by the shoulder. "Don't."

His gaze never left Erelah.

"She did this. Locked us out from the com-sys," Tyron said. Her stare was damning. Erelah knew she was marked a traitor in the soldier's eyes forever, despite the brief period of acceptance she had afforded her.

"Actually, *you* did," Erelah corrected.

Tyron's eyes widened as realization sank in. She lunged. Jon grabbed her by the collar, barely restraining her.

Jon wedged himself in front of Tyron. "Erelah, what are you doing? Think about this."

The alert continued to bleat, an insistent tempo.

"This is how it has to be. I'm so sorry." Tears prickled the corners of her vision.

"You're surrendering to Tristic?" His face folded.

"Jon, she will pursue us until there is nothing left."

"We can figure something out."

"No." Her courage threatened to lag once more. "It has to end here."

"Tristic won't stop with just you. You know that."

Erelah nodded, but did not correct him. True, if she had planned on simple surrender, Tristic would capture the Cassandra or just have it destroyed in a grand and menacing gesture.

No, that is why I must make a grand and menacing gesture of my own.

"When this is over, you'll regain control of the ship. But don't linger. Just in case." She saw the expression of anger on Tyron's face change. Although the bull-headed soldier had refused to hear her plan, she had become a part of it.

"I can't let you do this." Jon took a stride forward, decisive.

Erelah *pushed* out at him. That now familiar pricking sensation rushed over her with ferocity. It hungrily lashed out as she focused on Jon. Feelings and images flooded from him. She ignored them. They were a distraction. Instead she delved into the deeper place under his waking mind, the bedrock.

Erelah uttered a single word, focused as a command: "Sleep."

Jon collapsed to the deck mid-stride on joints of wet paper. Tyron was instantly kneeling over him, her face distressed. She righted Jon's head, clasped his hand and folded her forehead against it.

Erelah lowered the weapon, hating its cold sinister weight. She allowed the thing to clatter to the deck. Tyron did not take this as an invitation to move in on her. Now that she knew what Erelah could do.

"*This* was your plan?" Tyron growled. She turned an accusing gaze up at Erelah.

"He would have tried to stop me."

The question was plain on Tyron's face.

"I can't make *you* sleep like that. Like I said, you're all sharp edges, hard to get underneath." Erelah replied. "Besides, you have to watch over him."

"Just do what you're going to do. You've already done enough damage here." She looked back down at Jon, the anguish in her voice like nothing a soldier would ever reveal.

Erelah wanted to tell her how much he saw in her: the potential he believed dwelled beneath that hard surface. She wanted to tell Tyron how right Jon was and to plead with her not to destroy that tender faith he had in her. Because she deserved it.

39

That crazy skew bitch!

Sela glared at Erelah, but was reluctant to leave Jon's side. He was vulnerable.

The proximity alert chattered on. Although the tempo had not increased, it sounded more insistent. Sela knew what she would find if she were to access the sens-con: a Ravstar carrier.

Suddenly, the deck bucked. Metal creaked somewhere to her left and overhead. It felt like the fist of a giant pounding the tired old Cass. It was the signature turbulence of disrupted ions pushing forth in a tremendous wave that could be created only by a massive vessel exiting the conduit. The Cass, still adrift, had been too close to the flex point when the Ravstar vessel emerged and as a consequence had borne the brunt of the ion displacement of a far larger vessel.

Any moment now, they'll destroy us.

Sela fold over Jon, trying to keep his head from smacking the bulkhead as the Cass rocked in the fading backwash signature. His breathing seemed fine. He was essentially asleep. She exhaled a shaking breath.

Her fury blossomed. Erelah. I will take this out on her pallid hide, if I live through this.

Sela rose, whirling in Erelah's direction, and glimpsed the sealing cargo bay door and the younger woman's pale face just before it shut. The lights on the magseal flipped to red. Locked.

She sprang to her feet and covered the distance with swift strides.

Her plan. Her stupid Fates-damned plan!

And she used me to bring us here.

The dream about Atilio, watching him flip through nav charts. It had been her own hands entering the coordinates of this destination like a puppet, doing another's will. Somehow the girl had slipped inside of her sleeping mind and used her to program the nav-sys.

In futile rage, Sela kicked the door again and again. Even if she managed to wake the Cass's engines back up, they could not spool up the velo drives in time. They were locked out, adrift. Erelah had wanted to be sure that Jon did not intervene.

Sela ran back to the command loft, leaping over Jon's sprawled form.

Although the Cass had been sent into a slow spin by the ion wake of the *Questic*, the external vids still tracked the newly arrived vessel. She regarded its image on the screen. It was not the same raptor class vessel that had attacked Merx. This was a deacon class carrier as large as the *Storm King*. Now it lumbered like a spiny, coiled monstrosity. The black hull gleamed in muted star light. Her velo drive glowed in a sinister cool yellow.

It was a ship meant to inspire fear and awe.

All it evoked from Sela was unadulterated fury.

"Oh, you're an ugly bitch, aren't you?"

Sela jabbed off the proximity alert. The Cass drifted in silence now. The occasional hiss of fried circuits sounded under the uncertain flicker of the lights. Coolant dripped from unseen leaks to bubble and pop, releasing a sickly burnt smell. At least nothing was on fire yet.

There was nothing she could do here.

She rushed back down into the companionway. Back in the corridor she pressed against the bulkhead, slid down the wall, drew her knees up and sat next to Jon.

We're not going out like this. Think, Sela, think!

She looked overhead at the meshwork of conduits and exposed wiring, marveling at the fact that they had not had a catastrophic failure yet. It was a tech's nightmare of patches, bypasses and creative wiring. Even if she started pulling wires at random to override the computer, she would likely make it worse

"Damn it all!" Her fist pounded the wall.

"Ty?"

It was Jon's voice, thin and uncertain. She looked down to see him move a shaky hand to his head. He pushed up onto an elbow.

"Nominal?" Sela asked. It came out as a breathless sob.

"What's happened?" His gaze was distant, fuzzy. "I think I was dreaming."

"She did this."

"Erelah?" His face folded with lingering confusion. "Where is she?"

She jerked her chin toward the bay. "She sealed the door to the hangar. She's in there with that bloody stryker."

He studied her. "What did you do?"

Sela felt the blood rush to her face. She could not look at him. The plan. Erelah's stupid plan. Had she only bothered to listen, could she have prevented this? "She planned this. I never thought—"

Jon climbed to his feet. Weaving heavily from wall to wall, he made his way to the bay hatch. In an unconscious replay of Sela's actions moments before, he beat and kicked ineffectually at the metal.

"Erelah, damn it! Open this door!"

"There's no time," Sela said. "Ravstar is here. Their carrier just exited the flex point behind us. There has to be a way around the command lockout."

He looked back at the hatch, laying one last dull smack against the heavy metal with the palm of his hand. Grudgingly he allowed Sela to pull him toward the command loft.

Sela opened the only operational system they could access: Sensory horizon.

Of course the viewers still worked.

She wants us to see, to witness this.

"Still in command lockout." She tapped ineffectively at the interface to her right.

"There has to be something…"

Jon's voice trailed off into defeated hurt as he frantically tabbed through a flurry of screens. Each new command settled on the same override lockout.

"Even if we could move, we burned out the nodes when we left Merx." Sela used a scraped knuckle to gesture at the reads. "The carrier will be on us before we can reach full spool-up."

"We have to do something."

"There's nothing left!" she said with sudden fury. "Erelah has seen to that! We're dead."

A new, excited pinging sounded.

"She's prepping to vent the bay." Sela snapped off the strident warning. The Cass's androgynous voice echoed her observation in Commonspeak.

Jon tried to open the vox link. Dull static answered. He turned to Sela.

"You knew." He glared.

"Only that she had a plan. But not this—"

"You knew something. And you didn't say a thing."

Sela turned away, unable to answer. The guilt twisted in her gut. Erelah had tried to tell her and she had refused to listen.

"She knew you wouldn't go along with it, so she came to me and asked me to help."

"And so you did."

"No. Jon, I refused. Because it meant betraying you."

He slapped the console away. The screen flew back on its pivot, striking the bulkhead.

"Just go. Try to talk to her." Her voice simmered with defeat.

Jon watched her in the red glow of the useless tell-tales.

"There's nothing for you to do here anyway," Sela said.

"Erelah! Open this door right now!"

Jon's voice issued from both the speaker on the wall and came muffled through the thick bay door. Erelah's spine stiffened with the impulse to obey.

"Whatever it is you're planning, you don't have to do this!"

Hands trembling, she grabbed the last of the environmental scrubbers and sprinted back to the *Jocosta*. The ruined components clattered to the floor as she exchanged them for the fully charged ones. Erelah kept her back turned to the hatch. She knew what she would see there: her brother's distraught face hovering at the other side of the thick glass.

"Don't do this!"

There was a hollow tug in her chest. She paused halfway up the side of the *Jocosta* to look at the door. Jon pressed his open palm to the glass. She could see the pale curve of his face beyond. He took this as a hesitation from her. His pounding on the glass renewed. She forced herself to look away.

A weakness. A momentary weakness. Nothing more.

There was no time. She willed her limbs back into motion. Sliding down into the cockpit that still smelled of charred filaments and ozone, Erelah donned the headgear.

The flight computer accepted her passkey and rolled through its familiar protocols. To her primed imagination the stryker's sounds seemed more menacing, as if the ship knew her intent. The Cass's computer continued to count down the bay depressurization as she sealed the *Jocosta*'s canopy.

The engines hitched once, but activated. There was no time for a pre-flight check. There was time only for luck and prayers. The j-drive spool up took mere seconds, not the plodding forever of a velo. A deep hum began to resonate through the body of the stryker. It vibrated her bones and wrapped her brain with its numbing harmonics.

But it failed to drown out the insistent voice on the vox headset:

"Just answer me," Jon begged.

There was a fierce desperation in the plea that she could not shut out.

If I do not do this, they are dead, or worse.

She could not choose a fate for Jon and Tyron. They did not deserve that. For a moment, another weak moment, she paused. Her fingers actually hovered over the abort sequence controls.

Instead, she triggered the vox open.

"I'm sorry, Jon."

Then cut the channel completely.

The *Jocosta* glided effortlessly from the hangar.

Nyxa make me your vessel. Nyxa make me your fiery sword and your instrument. Nyxa guide my hand and my eye. Nyxa clear my Path.

The prayer rolled on and on, a litany in her head. She muttered it under her breath in a tuneless humming, unthinking. It was something to fill the empty space and flat air of the cockpit.

Uncle would not have been pleased.

He would not have condoned this destructive and violent act. But he was long dead, having abandoned them both to a place of hard choices.

The *Jocosta* was nothing, a mote of dust compared to the, *Questic*. A science vessel named in ancient Eugenes to mean the quest for knowledge. The word had a darker meaning too: to interrogate under torture. That was not an innocent accident. Nothing within Tristic's power was ever innocent for long.

Erelah felt the hybrid's presence push against that barrier in her head. It held, firmly. She learned that the harder the force Tristic exerted from without, the more solid the barrier would become. Her voice would never torment Erelah's mind again, but she could sense her excitement. The beast thought her broken, surrendering and finished.

Erelah relished the correction that came next. Although, delivering it was likely to bring her end.

Time. Be patient.

Nyxa make me your vessel. Nyxa make me your fiery sword and your instrument…

The message she wanted to see rolled onto the heads-up. The *Questi*'s engines were nearing a powered-down state. Their fuel reserves were low. The image of the drive field around her midsection glowed a hot yellow-orange, like the smoldering embers of a forge.

Here she would make a different weapon. Here she could become a fiery sword.

Nyxa guide my hand. Nyxa clear my Path.

Everything that came next seemed from far away: a story she was telling in her head. Her hands did not shake as she keyed in the final commands. They were the hands of someone else, a warrior twin. She was braver. Her spine did not quiver, but sat bolt upright in the seat of the stryker. This twin did not waste thought on failed farewells or lost futures. She did not flinch as she felt the surge of energy engulf the stryker. The radiance grew around them, blinding and fierce.

And with her warrior twin, Erelah embraced the blackness that followed.

40

Sela understood why Erelah had left the viewer active while the rest of the Cass's systems had been locked out. She wanted witnesses for an impossible feat, the last act of incredible bravery that Sela had dismissed as a coward's end.

But this was not cowardice. As a soldier, to witness such an act of self-sacrifice from one who had been ally and enemy alike, it rendered her speechless.

A deadly blossom of azure veined with white consumed the entire midsection of that hideous Ravstar vessel. The hulking metal beast crumpled inward and folded toward the mouth of the flex point Erelah had created with the stryker. Like the delicate fabric of a curtain, the skin of the carrier undulated under the ravages of the distortion wave.

A tremendous ball of fire issued along the exposed side of Tristic's carrier. The flames were quickly silenced by the cold of space. For a brief flickering moment, the wash of blue grew stronger still, eating metal wherever it landed.

"'Great violence and force'," Sela muttered in amazement. In that moment, she realized the full scope of Erelah's meaning.

After a punishing period of conduit travel, the reserves on the carrier's velos must have been nearly drained. Somehow the tiny stryker had the ability to trigger a flex point. This was catalyst for an explosion that blessedly had little fuel. It had been just enough to mortally wound the *Questic*.

Otherwise, we would not still be here.

The vortex vanished, leaving the ravaged carrier to twist against an invisible eddy, a huge gash dissecting its decks. It listed like a crushed insect, floating and writhing on the surface of a pond.

Around Sela the command loft of the Cassandra popped back to life. The once red-barred consoles now resumed their prior interfaces. The drives hummed in a building crescendo as spool-up was initiated.

Erelah had done this. Or, more correctly, she had done this through Sela.

Their window was short. Regardless of the mortal wound that had been rendered, there was no real guarantee Tristic had been destroyed. The Cassandra was vulnerable to capture. Jon would have argued against it, but he was not there to stop her. He would have wanted to search the wreckage, seek out something that remained of his sister, as ridiculous as it sounded.

They could not risk that hesitation. Sela made the decision for him. Another fault in the growing list of harms done against him.

She guided the Cassandra through the rapidly-splaying field of debris. At first, the vox was alive with the sound of living ghosts. Hectic voices pled for rescue. Others responded with ineffectual shouts and orders. Sela snapped the speaker off.

I have witnessed the end of too many things already.

Within moments, the aptly named dead node was a memory as the Cassandra limped its way through the conduit.

Jon remained at the other side of the bay door for a long time, knees drawn up, back pressed into the curve of the bulkhead. He watched some private landscape with red-rimmed eyes. Was he recounting every sin? Blaming himself for every squandered opportunity and wasted hope?

He never did say. Sela did not ask.

41

"You have the look of a woman with a thousand miseries."

The voice interrupted the mire of her thoughts as she stared into the mysterious depths of the mug before her.

Sela did not look up. "Get a lot of dates with that one?"

"You tell me." Jon slid into the booth across from her.

Her position in the tavern was tactically sound. Back to the wall. Facing the door. All of the similar spots were occupied in this place. Everyone here watched the door. It was that kind of place. Hands nervously flitted to side arms when there were disruptions in the roar and flow of the atmospheric din.

Business was slow. The gaming tables were not even in play. A crime boss had cut off the Hedalian port in retribution against some rebellious clan of Zenti pirates. Sela cared little for the details. It simply meant that this place was comparatively peaceful. And everyone here had other things to worry about.

"It's been ten days, Ty. Hard time finding you."

"Found me."

But the truth was, she wanted to be found. She had finally decided earlier that day. It had been easy to elude him, Sela recalled with a stubborn sense of pride. She knew he would not depart and would, with matching stubbornness, seek her out. He was bound to her as much as she was to him. A bond held them in each other's orbit, like two damned stars, destined to eventually decay into each other and bring everything in the space around them to a crushing end.

"Sela." His voice was quiet, pleading.

She finally looked at him and the rusty hook in her heart turned. Jon was clean-shaven once more. His thick dark hair was neatly groomed. His broad

shoulders were squared beneath the sharp lines of a jacket in good repair. Once more he was her perfect Eugenes captain.

But that was never the truth, was it?

"You wanted some space… some time to think," he prodded. "So let's hear it."

She could tell that he was steeling himself, waiting for her to say something damaging and permanent. *Is that what he thinks of me?*

"There's no place for me," she said. "I don't know where I belong."

The ghost of his infamous lopsided grin surfaced. "Could say the same of me."

"You had a life before…all of this. Before the Regime. I didn't. I know only one way to look at the Worlds."

"I've never believed that about you. Not for a second."

He leaned across the table. His hand rested over hers. She stiffened, fearful that he would say those strained words again. Three little words that were meant to carry so much, like overburdened ships cursed to flounder. He had not said them again since that day on Tasemar. That felt like eternities ago.

"What now, cap'n?"

"You tell me, Sela. Your choice."

Across the marred surface of the table, she studied him. There was fear in not knowing what came next. There was undeniable love for this man. But such a costly vulnerability. Daily, these thoughts warred like ancient gods from the old stories. She watched as a mere mortal, with everything to win or lose.

Sela rose. The table wobbled on its uneven legs as she slid out of the booth. She allowed her hand to trail down his arm.

At the doorway she stopped and drew in a long steady breath. Looking back over her shoulder, she waited for him to follow her out into the eye-watering brilliance of the world beyond.

She could imagine no other Path.

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ALLIES AND ENEMIES: FALLEN,

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Second installment of the series

By: AMY J. MURPHY

INTRODUCING

ALLIES AND ENEMIES: ROGUES

1

Lingering and invasive, the rough hands moved over her body.

Time was playing tricks. It felt like this should be in the interior of the medical suite. Lieutenant Maynard had come to do his gloating. But the smells were wrong. No sharp anesthetics. There was not the familiar pressure of metal table at her back. A deep, straining ache gnawed at her shoulders and neck. Instead this place reeked of sweat and rust. The air was too warm and humid. Erelah

experimentally opened her eyes and lifted her head. From high overhead, harsh white light stabbed into her skull. She squeezed her eyes shut defensively. The hands tugged at the fasteners of her flight suit.

"I wouldn't do that, Spivey. Jin-ji claimed her—"

"Well, Korbyn ain't here. Is he? Just shut up an' watch the door."

Commonspeak. Thick, plodding accents.

Erelah pried opened her eyes to be greeted by a heavily-tattooed Zenti male's menacing grin.

"Wakin' up there, lovely?"

With a gasp she tried to pull away. Panic swelled like an eager rushing tide. Her body was hanging, suspended by her bound wrists. Her hands had gone numb, the circulation cut off by the tight bonds.

No. This was not one of the hateful medical labs aboard the giant Ravstar carrier, *Questic*, nor was it her brother's ancient Cassandra vessel.

I should be dead. Why am I not dead?

That was the plan.

"Who says Asher always gets the pretty meat?" Spivey licked his lips. His flat yellow gaze studied her. His thick fingers brushed over her cheek.

Suddenly, like a reflex, she bit down on his hand.

Spivey squealed, jumping away. "Bitch bit me!"

This was greeted by laughter and jeers.

The taste of his blood was revolting. She spat onto the deck.

He glared. Cradling his hand he disappeared from her field of vision. Something heavy collided with her side, enough to knock the wind out of her. Erelah gasped. He had kicked her, she realized. There was an ensuing ripple of laughter from the occupants of the room's dim corners. The space echoed: large, like a hangar or a cargo hold.

She sincerely hoped that this was a nightmare. Again, icy panic rushed in. On top of it, something else asserted itself, like a wall:

Feel that fear? It's fuel. Use it. That pain? The pain is good. It means you're still alive, still in the fight.

Not me. That voice isn't mine. The memory isn't mine. It belonged to a Regime soldier named Tyron, a woman who very likely would have wished her great personal harm.

Could Tyron be here as well? And Jon?

Remember. Think!

The last thing she remembered was the ship *Jocosta*. The fiery azure lights of the singularity. A diving plunge into oblivion to take out the *Questic*, to end Defensor Tristic's relentless pursuit of her, to end Tristic.

I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be anywhere.

Did I fail?

She tried to get her feet under her to take her weight. It alleviated the pressure in her arms and shoulders. The deck plates transmitted a vibration that suggested powerful engines beneath her bare feet.

My boots. Why would anyone take my boots?

Erelah blinked out into the darkness beyond the white circle of light. Beyond its reach, huddled shapes shifted.

Six? Perhaps more? All sounded male.

Zenti. The one, Spivey, was a Zenti. His broad features were etched with heavy black-and-red clan tattoos.

Their race knew no love for the Regime, having been forced to cower in the remote systems. Erelah's panic spiked as she realized who they must be. They addressed each other as clan members. It meant only one thing: pirates.

Spivey lunged at her from the huddle of dark shapes. Fury compressed his brute features. "Spivey! Back off! I said no one touches her! She's mine!"

The sharp command was given by a deep resonant voice from somewhere behind her. It raised a fragmented memory of that same voice, commanding and insistent, trying to rouse her.

The acrid smell of ozone and seared wires. Smoke cloying her lungs. The voice barking more orders, the sounds of others nearby. Powerless, she felt her body lifted, haphazard and limp. A broad shoulder dug into her stomach with each plodding step. The pronouncement in Commonspeak: She'll live. Being flopped gracelessly on the deck.

The voice belonged to Korbyn. Their *jin-ji*. Captain.

More shouts and hails from the men in the shadows. Their mood seemed celebratory, in a menacing sort of way.

Spivey shrank. "*Jin-ji*. I check on her for you."

"Right," came the reply, completely unconvinced. "Don't 'member ordering that."

"Wake now. You see. Got lots of fight in 'er." Spivey was backing away now, tucking his bitten hand behind his back.

"Give me the room, brothers."

More sniggering and sounds of roughhousing as their shadows dispersed.

The room quieted, then:

"Spivey!"

The Zenti stopped in his tracks for the door. His shoulders shrank together.

"Yes, *jin-ji*?"

"That's *once* I caught you," Korbyn warned.

"Right," Spivey muttered, by way of admission of guilt. Then as an afterthought, "Amends, *jin-ji*." A door slammed shut.

After that, the only sounds were the purposeful slow thud of Korbyn's boots on grating and the creak of leather somewhere in the darkness behind her.

"You're very lucky that I found you."

He was much closer than she expected him to be, his voice mere inches from her back.

"Your stryker… something nasty took a swipe at it. Sturdy ship to keep you alive." His voice circled to her left, just outside of the baleful light that bore down from above.

Jocosta. Her heart bounced. But she said nothing, spine stiffening. If the vessel were nearby and still intact, then there was a chance to—

"Oh, escape, she thinks," he mocked.

Korbyn stepped into the light. He was tall and muscular, his shaven head inked with clan markings. But he was not Zenti. He was Eugenes. Almost handsome, he possessed brutally cunning eyes. He studied her, but not with the same animal want as Spivey.

"You're not a breeder," he said. "Too scrawny. Wrong color eyes." It was a pronouncement, evaluation.

He leaned into her neck, inhaling. "Not a Tech. Too tall. Wrong smell."

His voice seemed to feign a shared secret, intimating. But she did not shrink away. Erelah knew this play from Maynard, her former jailer. Korbyn's menace was pale in comparison to the brand offered by that monster. Somehow she sensed this *jin-ji* was more concerned with appearances. He was testing her.

"You got a name, girl?"

"What is this?" she rasped in Commonspeak. "What do you want?"

Internally, she cringed at the sound of her own voice. Erelah had never developed much of a knack for the brutish language. It sounded just as it was: a high born attempting to speak the language of the gutter.

Korbyn laughed.

"Her majesty stoops to use Commonspeak." He said this in High Eugenes. But his pronunciation was awkward, as if it were rusted from disuse. "Good. Now, does she have a name?"

Erelah said nothing, regretting her mistake of speaking. She had already revealed too much. The lazy intellect generally assigned men of Korbyn's

musculature was misapplied here. He was quite observant and might prove too clever to outwit.

"Maybe we'll stick to Regimental. Common ground," he continued, switching languages easily.

Perhaps he thought he had a wealthy lost Kindred in his possession and was already guessing at what her ransom would pay. Oh, was he in for a bitter surprise. There was no grieving great house left to pay for her safe return. The man who raised her, Helio Veradis, a man she called "Uncle", was long dead, the last member of a lineage that had once wielded influence. In fact, Defensor Tristic was the only party that would likely pay for her and would only bring Korbyn and his men grim death—if they were lucky.

"Hmm… green eyes. Nice." He tilted his head. "Rare color for a Eugenes. Brought some embarrassment, I'm sure. Not the purest line. Maybe a little back-birth world, way out in the raggedly bits from Origin. Some peasant Kindred. Or maybe a Last Daughter they couldn't marry off."

He slid one of her sleeves down. "No bonding brands on your arms. So they shipped you off to Fleet then? And now look at you… all the way out in my little corner of the black, all lost like."

She looked away, swallowing. A chance encounter with this man and he struck closer to the truth than anyone would have guessed. Uncle had altered Erelah and her brother in many ways, but eye color had been the least of his concerns. His main objective had been to skew their genetics in order to hide their true nature as a Human and not Eugenes. As a child, she had begged Uncle to have her eyes fixed. *But child,* he would say, smiling down at her, *there is nothing broken.*

"That it?" Korbyn pouted in mock sympathy. "Would the grand matron of your Kindred even pay to get you back?"

He reached out to touch her chin. She jerked back, fearful of what visions his touch would bring to her mind.

"Don't," she hissed. "Please don't."

He snorted. Undaunted, he played with the unraveling plait of her hair. He leaned closer still. "I ain't got the rot, if that's what you're afraid of."

She could try to use the Sight on him, and get him to free her. It had worked with Maynard. But to do that, she needed his touch, and she didn't know if she had the strength for that.

Everything felt so heavy, as if the a-grav were doubled. Her very spine felt brittle with fatigue. Using the Sight meant feeling herself fall away and slipping under his skin. It meant becoming him, if only for a brief moment. Each time she used the Sight she left a little bit of herself behind.

Too weak. I couldn't withstand it.

"Just don't touch me," she said in Regimental.

"I can't touch the lady. Too nice for Asher Korbyn." He mimicked a Eugenes accent. "Got news for you, sister. You're far gone from Origin. This place eats everything. Even lost little girls like you. Right now I'm the closest thing you got to a friend out here, sweetling."

"Here? Where's here?"

Korbyn reached above her, his face looming closer. She shrank back. There was a clank of something metallic and the tension on her restraints lessened.

"You really don't know. Do you?" There was an incongruous flicker of something in his deep maroon gaze. She might have mistaken it for pity.

Maroon, like a Binait skin slave's. Far from a pure bred Eugenes himself.

Although her wrists were still bound together, she could now lower her arms. She gasped at the relief in her shoulders. Her legs felt so weak. She staggered and almost fell.

He gripped her arm, steadying her.

"Look." She licked her lips. "Just let me go. This is—"

"This is business." His arrogance reappeared like a shield. "Sorry. Nothing personal."

Eyes narrowed, he met her gaze. "Trouble. I can see that from where I stand. And that's all I need to know. I don't want to hear your story, little girl. The Reaches are full of little tragedies like yours."

The Reaches.

A bleak hopelessness spread through her. She had somehow ended up here, on the other side of the Known Worlds from where she'd last been conscious: the dead station and her attempt to destroy the *Questic.*

How could that even be?

Then I am truly lost.

She allowed herself to sag.

"So that leads us back to where we started. Your name."

Erelah was suddenly exhausted beyond caring. Her body ached and trembled, bones hurting as if they had been ground to mulch. Even if she could find a means to get away, how could she navigate out of the Reaches?

Perhaps I am not meant to.

He dipped his chin to peer into her face. "All I'm asking for is a name. Just your name."

"Tilley," she croaked, eyes downcast. "My name's Tilley…Valen."

The lie bubbled out of her, unbidden, a spark of self-preservation that Erelah would hesitate to credit to herself. It was the Tyron-voice again.

For a judging silence, she watched the thick fingers on his right hand play an impatient staccato against his thigh, where the bone hilt of a curved blade rested.

"I doubt it," he said, straightening. "Anyone ever tell you that you're a bad liar?"

"Actually yes," she rasped.

He clamped a chummy hand down on her shoulder. "Guess I have to call you something."

He pulled her forward and looped his arm under hers as her legs attempted to fold. She felt herself righted as if she weighed nothing.

"Easy," he said in a rough whisper. "Word of advice… *Tilley*. You don't want to look weak in front of my crewies. Makes my job harder to keep them off you."

Erelah pulled away.

What sort of game was he playing?

Perhaps he guessed her thoughts. He shrugged. "Just evening the odds. Come on." He jerked his chin.

She wobbled along, her movements made awkward by her bound arms and bare feet. The smooth deck plates underfoot transitioned to toothed metal grating that chewed her feet.

"Why'd you take my boots?"

"Trel fancied 'em."

She frowned up at him.

"What? Would you preferred he taken something else?"

She looked away, realizing his meaning. "No."

They entered a corridor made narrow by stacks of haphazardly piled crates with markings that suggested all manner of origins. Only one or two held writing she could decipher. She tried her best to remember their route as they moved through the ship. That Tyron-voice told her to count doorways, look for landmarks. But she still felt dazed and quickly lost count.

At another intersection, they passed a torn-out panel. Three Zenti huddled around it, dodging showers of sparks as they worked. They looked up at her, eyes hungry. Self-consciously she drew herself up, trying to straighten her shoulders and thrust up her chin. *Act as if they weren't there.* Beneath her. Despite her pretense, she felt the unease coil around her stomach. Korbyn's massive hand on her upper arm tightened, nearly pulling her off her feet.

"Don't get any ideas." His tone was coarse, surly. But something about it seemed exaggerated to her. "I know you're counting steps, doorways."

Korbyn was putting on a show for them as well, it seemed. Perhaps he did not command the authority he pretended. It was a notion that frightened her all the more. After all, he was the only thing standing between her and certain violation.

They stopped before a closed hatch. Korbyn leaned over a keypad lock, obscuring her view. She heard the unmistakable sounds of a code.

Four digits. Assuming a standard eight-number template and permitting for repeated digits that meant 4,096 probable combinations. Erelah doubted she would have the time to try all of them.

He kicked the door open. It clanged against the wall and she jumped.

"Ladies first." He jerked his chin at the pitch-black space beyond.

She dug her heels into the deck, wincing at the pain in her bare feet. "What is this?"

"Accommodations, your highness. Nothing but the best."

Her heart squeezed. "No. It's dark."

He frowned. "Space is dark. Yet that didn't seem to stave you."

"You don't understand." Erelah swallowed. The void beyond the metal hull of the ship was *not* the same. This was being shut in with darkness where terrible things dwelled—a childhood fear Tristic used for her torment.

Korbyn growled. Rolling his eyes, he reached inside the doorway and glow-lamps fizzled on. A dull amber light illuminated a modestly sized room. There was an unmade bunk, bedclothes in a jumbled knot. The walls were plastered with bits of paper, images of naked and half-naked females in all manner of explicit poses. Clothing was strewn in untidy bundles on the floor. Empty scorch-rum containers lolled about the deck.

Then she realized, it was his room. The *jin-ji's* lair.

"Better?" he asked, muscling her over the threshold.

Not really. Erelah froze in the center of the chamber bound wrists pulled up to her chest protectively, terrified to touch anything.

"My valet has the day off." He backed into the hall and pulled the door closed.

It shut with the same hollow clang. She heard muted off-key beeps of the lock.

Erelah sank to her knees and felt the sense of helplessness threaten to overwhelm her. The tears that threatened finally came. She wanted to collapse and sob until her throat was raw.

But the Tyron-voice came back. It was stronger than ever.

You are not beaten. Not as long as you draw breath. There is work to do.

With that, Erelah rose from the floor on legs that seemed to belong to someone far stronger.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The shady underworld of the grade school essay black market was Amy Murphy's introduction to the possibility of writing things for money. Although real life intervened and her career path took a different direction from this gig, she continued to work on personal writing projects in the science fiction and horror genres.

Amy has a B.A. in Communications from the University of New Orleans. Originally from New Orleans, Amy now shares a home with her husband and a very entitled dog in the lovely state of Vermont.

Allies and Enemies is her first self-published endeavor. (And hopefully not her last.)

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